

# Thank You Notes After Christmas

Colleagues,

Herewith my Thank You notes—really an open letter—to all the folks who blessed me with an essay in that Birthday Festschrift last month. Responding to each contributor in those 229 pages I did exceed my own length-limit for a regular ThTh post. But I trust you can adjust. FYI, there still are Festschrift copies available at the Crossings office. I did not buy out the entire press run to send as Christmas presents. See the Crossings website for sample pages and how to get one: <[www.crossings.org](http://www.crossings.org)>Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

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*Festschrift Benefactors, all Dear, Two days after Christmas and high time to write those thank yous for the presents, those hand/head-crafted gifts you sent my way on November 6. Yes, I am about a month overdue from the time I did indeed read through the whole volume.*

*Part of it is being tongue-tied. What to say for this bundle of benefactions? Part of it is the slow-down that's coming with those three-and-one-half score years. Even if Thursday Theology postings still making their weekly appearance—pretty soon, d.v., 400—might suggest the contrary. And I won't mention sloth and procrastination.*

*I recite the long list of folks, real theologians, who didn't get Festschrifts as far as I know, and that pushes the*

question: Why me? What I come up with is that you, you all, are the answer. I've been blessed—mirabile dictu—with different students and colleagues than those other folks have had. If not, then their students/colleagues would have done likewise for them. But they didn't and you did. Y'all are something else. And that goes doubly for the really crazy ones, you editors, Steve, Sherm and Robin, who engineered it all, who oozed the buckets of sweat equity to put this marvel into my hands.

I imagine, though I'm not sure, that in the German tradition whence *Festschriften* come, the honored one writes a letter—(hand-writes, I betcha, in the old days) a separate letter to each author. I may well be considerably “Kraut-ish,” but that Teutonic I am not. Thus what I say to one below, I say to all. And this I say to all: I'm smitten, thrilled, carried away (here I will jump into German) “hingerissen” by your *Festschrift* gift to me. With this (no surprise) homiletic add-on, that you gift-givers are the loftiest gifts of all.

1. Jerome E. Burce

GOSPEL BLAZES IN THE DARK What a title! Both for the book and for your poem, Jerry. What was its provenance, I wonder. All the more so in this octave when St. John's prolog, the Gospel for 12/25, takes light/darkness as major metaphors for his cosmic rendition of “O Little Town of Bethlehem.” I was guest preacher at our Bethel congregation on Sunday and didn't come close to ringing the changes on that as powerfully as you did, Jerry. And nowhere near as poetically or rhetorically. Here is a case where the student—pace, Jesus—is clearly beyond the teacher. Thanks be to God.

2. David Gooding

You were unknown to me before November 6. I have already asked Jerry to pass on to you my “todah.” Jerry encouraged

me to use that Hebrew word (much more multi-faceted than its regular English rendering "give thanks"). Now I know why. You double as worship-music-man for a Hebrew congregation as well as at Jerry's Messiah Lutheran Church in Greater Cleveland, Ohio. Up till now my miniscule knowledge of the Cleveland music scene was the name George Szell and more recently Dietrich Bonhoeffer's nephew, Christoph von Dohnanyi, son of Dietrich's sister Christine and director of the Cleveland Symphony. Now I not only know better, but I've been a direct beneficiary of a great Gooding gift. That gift repeats every time that we sing the hymn again (skipping Jerry's 2a verse about "fiery Ed," lest my hybris go hyper). The melody lingers on. Thanks be to God. Todah.

3. Ron O'Grady

Your chapter was a surprise. Not its substance, but that "they" found you straight through the middle of our planet in New Zealand. But cyberspace is now the "noe-sphere" that Teilhard dreamed of (wasn't that his term?), and I shouldn't be surprised. I should ask the library experts for verification, but I'm guessing that no *Festschrift*—surely not in the tradition of published theology—ever appeared with four full-color full-page prints of contemporary Christian art. Best of all is your walking us through our own American culture and history—churchly and otherwise—put before our eyes by these four artists. Doubtless folks from afar see us more clearly than we even can see ourselves. Marie joins me in the doxology for that serendipity when you and Alison first crossed our path—and the several Crossings thereafter at our house, your house and even in Korea in 1992. Thanks be to God.

4. Albert E. Jabs

Al, your piece opens the *Festschrift's* Part II. Gospel

*Blazes in Life's Journey. You are even more hooked on German terms than I am, as you trace the strange and wonderful lines of your own life journey. Indeed, in many places it has paralleled and intersected with mine. For example, that "intersection" in Japan where you found Ron O'Grady's art book (now you know him too, right next to you in the Festschrift) with Marie's and Ed's prose in it. The hype you send in my direction is patently hyperbole (literally: something thrown way too high). Even though what goes up must come down, I binged on it as I read it. For your manifold ministries, not least of which to the Crossings Community, Thanks be to God.*

5. Robert C. Schultz

*Bob, you know the Festschrift tradition inside-out from its German roots, so no wonder that your essay has all those footnotes—90 of them—underpinning your monograph. But the topic calls for them, a chronicle of our time together, almost a half century ago, in our first "paid jobs" as theology profs at Valparaiso University. That itself wouldn't call for footnotes. But your proposal to track the work we did in hammering out "The Distinction between Law and Gospel as a Hermeneutical Principle: Valparaiso University 1958-1960" during those days, that cannot be done without documents. You patently kept them all; I didn't, even though we were co-conspirators on this assignment and worked desk-to-desk in the same office. So you have the file folders. You tell us what's in them. Plus you interpret it in the environment of the Missouri Synod of that day, the bane and blessing of our younger years. That LCMS doctoral student (name I forget) whose recent dissertation weighed "Valparaiso theology" and found it wanting, needs your documentary to get his facts straight, even if it might not make straight the path of his own theology. What makes your essay relevant*

for Crossings folks, as you and I know, but they may not, is that those two years at Valpo, with department chair Bob Bertram in the troika, were the opening chapter of the history of Crossings. And, as I think I could document, this is also an early chapter in the history of Seminex. Here too you, like Al Jabs, hyperventilate my role at that time. But maybe I'm just more forgetful. Perhaps it is more than my file folders that are empty. But if I'm not that amnesiac, methinks mi-office-mate professeth too much. Even so, thanks be to God for those good old days—and the decades we've been hustling this hermeneutic since then.

6. Joest J. Mnemba

Joest, after Ron's gift from New Zealand, comes one even more exotic from you in Malawi, East Africa. We get no colored pictures in your "Images of Christ in Africa," but the word-images are equally vivid, even visual. You show us the "made-in-Malawi" matrix for several images of Christ—as ancestor, as mediator/intercessor, as first-born, as medicine man, as lamb that was slain. This last one brings to my mind another African theologian, from Botswana, I think, Gabriel M. Setiloane, and his poem from 1973 "I Am An African." In his final stanzas he tells us:

And yet for us it is when He is on the cross,  
This Jesus of Nazareth, with holed hands  
and open side, like a beast at a sacrifice:  
When He is stripped naked like us,  
Browned and sweating water and blood in the heat of the  
sun,  
Yet silent,  
That we cannot resist Him. How like us He is, this Jesus  
of Nazareth,  
Beaten, tortured, imprisoned, spat upon, truncheoned.

*Denied by His own, and chased like a thief in the night.*

*Despised, and rejected like a dog that has fleas,  
for NO REASON*

*OR . . . Was there a reason?*

*There was indeed . . .*

*As in that sheep or goat we offer in sacrifice,  
Quiet and uncomplaining.*

*Its blood falling to the ground to cleanse it, as us:  
And making peace between us and our fathers long passed away.*

*He is that LAMB!*

*His blood cleanses,  
not only us,*

*not only the clan,  
not only the tribe,*

*But all, all MANKIND:*

*Black and White and Brown and Red,  
All Mankind!*

*H0! . . . Jesus, Lord, Son of Man and Son of God,  
Make peace with your blood and sweat and suffering,  
With God, UVELINGQAKI, UNKULUNKULU,*

*For the sins of Mankind, our fathers and us,  
That standing in the same Sonship with all mankind and you,*

*Together with you, we can pray to Him above:  
FATHER FORGIVE.*

*Marie and I still have vivid images of our time with you,  
hob-nobbing around with your fellow-priests and parishioners (even the bishop!) as you gave us the royal tour those five days in Malawi in 2000. The memories*

become visual too at year's end. For right now we have the Malawi Christmas creche out on the table with those stunning hand-carved ebony figures, your kinfolk, verifying what Setiloane says and those images in your essay present. For all this, thanks be to God.

#### 7. Jerome E Burce

In addition to your blazing poetry at the front of the Festschrift comes now Jerry's jolly juggling with the term "justify." Which you run through the rhetoric of the computer (where I am engaged this very moment) to make perfectly clear in your own "nickel words" God's alternate proposal for "justifying" the lines of our life stories. Instead of picking a Procrustean paradigm—chopping off our excesses, stretching us ad infinitum to meet shortcomings, which would indeed obliterate our stories altogether—God opts, as you say, "to clean up our lines with a new program, the Word made flesh...the Word-Processor of word processors: XP [Chi-Rho]-Word," with the "Control-JC" button always at the ready. Reminding your conversation partner, Joe, what his secretary does to clean up his scissors-and-pasted reports and make them letter perfect, you tell us "In the same way when God, using XP-Word, wants to clean up the Great page of humanity, your line and mine included, he justifies the ungodly. Here's how. He highlights the text and hits Control-JC. Bingo. There it is, all beautiful, just the way God wanted it." Perhaps "nickel words" is no longer everyday argot, but your vocabulary of microchip-chatter says it like it is in lingo that is perfectly clear to this Illinois farm boy. For that and for a quarter-century of other goodies from JB about JC to me, Thanks be to God.

#### 8. Gary M. Simpson

When you place me alongside Dietrich Bonhoeffer with a view to show parallels instead of dissonance between us, I am flabbergasted. Not that I haven't learned—some of it through guys like you—that Bonhoeffer is the sort of Lutheran I'd like to be too. But I've never had the chutzpah, even the idea, to lay some of his bons mots alongside my own and see if they converge. Especially in the Christmas octave commemorating St. Stephen and Holy Innocents, martyrs for the faith, Bonhoeffer included, it just don't seem kosher to place them right alongside those of us who haven't laid down our lives for the Christ. When you reference "Schroeder's critique of Barth," my first thought is: What did I really say about Barth back there in my dissertation? When you then follow that up, saying that Bonhoeffer's Confession of Christ "intensifies Schroeder's critique," I sit up and listen. First response: "Who, me?" But if you say so, you, the first Seminex doctorate in systematic theology, then I ought to say Alfred Neumann's line: "What, me worry?" You have scoured my stuff, stuff that I'd almost forgotten (Areopagus, Setlioane, stuff in both the old and the new CTM), and I must admit that the way you put it together makes a compelling case. So I won't "argue" with you. [Now that's a switch!] Instead I'll thank you for this focused attention, serious (re-)searching, and happy conclusion. So once more, Thanks be to God. [P.S. the German citation in fn. 26 seems mixed up. Is it my problem? Yours? Luther's own? Or no snafu at all?]

9. Mervyn Wagner

Merv, your contribution, also a complete surprise, is a happy voice to hear—that of a third gift-giver (after Joest and Ron) from "downunder" in the southern hemisphere. You wrestle a tough topic, a classic case-study for Lutheran theology. How to be a community of



God's left-hand operation, a school with its educational calling, AND the holy Christian community (call it "church") both the product and the on-going agent of God's unique right-hand Christic initiative—and to do so "simul," all at the same time. Your ping-pong playing with the words "form" and "inform" is fascinating. You sift the rhetoric of "Gospel principles," often claimed for institutions that Christians build and operate, and show that even benign as they may be, principles are finally rules and regulations. Which THE gospel is not. Unless you specify the strange way God's "Gospel" rules. Namely by managing sinners with mercy, a.k.a. God's regime in Christ, always a give-away and never a you-gotta. In school terms: always a free lunch, never an assignment. So how can you run a school that way? You answer that under the rubric (glombed from Luther's catechisms) of baptismal priesthood. And that you divvy up three-fold: Christian vocation, speaking on behalf of others and finally speaking on behalf of God. Do you have any reports of schools who wrote such rubrics into their own mission statements? What happened? In the early days of Seminex we attempted to do something similar. Since we were starting a new school from scratch, we had new possibilities. Much of your essay recalls our attempts of 30-plus years ago. We didn't succeed to get everybody on board for our consciously-crafted left-hand/right-hand paradigm for "internal governance," as we called it, so it frequently limped. Where it did take effect, it was palpably different from the "benign monarchy" we'd all known from the past. One such difference was the shared responsibility across the board within the entire community. Bob Bertram discovered an ancient axiom from the Dominicans in the Middle Ages that we made our own: "The decision-makers shall be the consequence-takers, and

*the consequence-takers shall be the decision-makers."*

*Your proposal re-issues the call to use our Lutheran heritage at a core crossing point of the Gospel and our world. Thanks be to God.*

*10. Timothy J. Hoyer*

*You credit me with being a "nickel-words-smith." I thought I mostly told you seminarians that YOU should use nickel words in pastoring people. Whereas I, trying to move beyond my rural heritage, sought to learn some big words to demonstrate that I really belonged in the professors' club. So I'd inflict the dollar-sized words on you in the classroom—if for no other reason than to keep my job. This seemed to be required for the theological stuff that I submitted for publication. We used to joke in faculty meetings that the rule was "Publish or parish." Yes, that's an "a" not and "e" in the last word. But if you say that I never did escape the nickel words (and thus probably never did qualify for my big-words union card), and I did still keep my job, and you think that's a good thing, well, I won't quibble. Instead for you and your superb nickel-word theologizing, Thanks be to God.*

*11. Marcus C. Lohrmann*

*With what finesse you use the old "double dipstick" for asking and answering the question: Is the Church Dying? For as you say, there are better and worse ways for both asking and answering that. Your way is the better one. It's normed by that "double dipstick" we both learned years ago: 1) the uncluttered Gospel that necessitates Christ and 2) thus offers genuine "comfort and joy" to folks besieged by bad news, sometimes wall-to-wall bad news. I know you didn't do it just for me—using all those*

core confessional building blocks in this essay. I know that this prose is indeed the life-language of your episcopal praxis. For which I rejoice. What a cheering birthday present. Of course, as I read your essay, I remembered when the two of us as a team did similar stuff in Hong Kong in 1988, followed by that wild visit to the Phillippines. We called it *Crossings* then, and your *Festschrift* contribution shows that you're doing it still. All three steps: *TRACKING* the realities of those 189 congregations in NW Ohio whom you serve as synod. Getting your *FOUNDINGS* in the Christ-necessitating Gospel, and then *CROSSING* the two in the case study you give us from your daily work as synod bishop with those congregations. Your concluding sentences answer the opening question with a yes and no. "We have sought to show that the church is always in need of reclaiming the gospel and that when it fails to do so, in specific places and times, its dying can be a reflection of its unbelief and the judgment of God. We have indicated the truth that the church that is reliant upon the Lord is freed to give itself in service (i.e., dying) in the fashion of him who gave himself for the church." So there is dying and then there is dying. With your case study you gave us "one specific context" where you are the called leader "where dying is sometimes a result of unfaithfulness... and at other times a sign of the most vigorous faith in the most impossible of circumstances." Though I've said it to others above, I mean it for you too: Thanks be to God.

12. Steven E. Albertin

Steve, your namesake, editor Steve Kuhl, in introducing you to the *Festschrift* readership, credits you with saying this: "few have law-gospel lenses as finely ground as Ed [does]." Seems to me your lenses are in the same

category. The three “homiletical binds” you show us for law/gospel preaching testify to your own lenses. So that triggers this shop-talk among team-mates. It starts with my wondering about the expression “preaching God’s law.” It’s part of our standard vocabulary. Yet I wonder, is it really kosher? Do you know any place in the New Testament (or the Old) where that verb has that noun as its direct object? Isn’t the verb for preaching/proclaiming always linked to the Good News? And if that is so, what are we doing with “preaching both law and gospel” when the founding texts preach only one? Is preaching a verb reserved ONLY for the Good News? Isn’t it true that there really is no “neutral” verb for preaching in NT Greek at all, a verb that could go either way –with law or with gospel? The two main verbs I’m thinking of, keryssein and euaggelizein, have the object already tucked inside the verb: hustle THE message, gospelize (be a good-news-pusher). Here’s a hunch I have, specked out in Crossings medical metaphors of diagnosis and prognosis. To wit, the diagnostic task does not “preach” the patient into her sickness saying “You think you are well. Not so. Let me tell you how sick you really are.” Isn’t it more like this? The patient comes to the doc already ill, but most often ignorant. Possibly not even ignorant of the malady itself, but hooked on snake oil therapies for coping. Possibly even in the know about the affliction, and now in despair. The doc’s diagnosis doesn’t “preach” anything into the patient, but collects the patient’s data, runs them through a professional sieve and says: “Looks to me like cellulitis. Notice this and that symptom. Fit them together thus and so, it’s cellulitis.” The doc might even go further: “If we do nothing, here is where cellulitis patients wind up.” Note the three diagnostic steps of the Crossings matrix. Only when the doc moves to

therapeutic talk, do we get over to “preaching.” You can sketch that out too in the steps 4,5,6 of the Crossings prognosis sequence. (4) Cellulitis wilts when it meets medication X. (5) Here’s how you can get medication X into your system to have it work for you. (6) Here are some gospel-imperatives for living cellulitis-free in the specs of your daily life within the fellowship of the rest of us recovering patients.

If preaching really is a “Gospel-only” endeavor, would that change anything in the 3 “homiletical binds” for the preaching pastor? Would it add a fourth bind? Namely, to “preach” hellfire and brimstone in order to get the folks to say “uncle!” so that then, when you’ve “got ‘em,” you “preach” the good stuff. Is that law/gospel homiletics, or another kind of snake oil? Back to my first reason for all of this: It’s been good to journey along with you these many years in the law/gospel tradition. Thanks be to God.

### 13. Norb Kabelitz

Norb, your Octoberfest homily, almost on my birthday back in 1984 in Oklahoma City, at an “Ecumenical Service in St. Francis of Assisi Church on the occasion of the 47th Anniversary of the Reformation,” is a real hoot. I.e., good. What still makes me wonder, however, is your footnote: “This homily owes its inspiration to an Ecumenical Writing by Edward H. Schroeder.” Even after second reading of your script I can’t divine what ecumenical writing of mine is allegedly inspiring, conspiring—even perspiring—in, with and under your proclamation. It’s solid Reformation Gospel, but where, when, what did I write way back then that calls forth this footnote? I’m not sure I even was “ecumenical” let

alone “inspiringly” so, when I was “only” 53 yrs old. Even so, Thanks be to God.

14. Robin Morgan

15. Sherman Lee

You two have been part of the troika for the two (count 'em, TWO) Festschrifts presented to me in my “senior years.” You invested, as I know from shoptalk with both of you, large slices of your lives for this 75th anniversary extravaganza publication. I also remember your initiative and effort (in nickel words, hard work) on that earlier one at the time of my retirement from honchoing the Crossings Community back in the early 90s. So I know that were it not for you two, neither Festschrift would have happened. So todah, todah, todah, todah. Two for each of you. The crisp articles you’ve contributed to this volume focus on Faith Place, the “city mission” new-start where you’re taking your long-learned and well-internalized Crossings theology out on the street into scruffy south St. Louis. If it won’t “work” here, it won’t work anywhere. Your final sentence, Sherm, pulls it together: “God willing, with Him waging battle for us in the War Zone, beckoning us from our Comfort Zones and into His Peace Zone, Faith Place and other missions will be able to continue to establish (as Robin pointed out) more holy ground.” So it IS working. Thanks be to God.

16. Marie A. Failing

Marie, did I really say that? I’m referring to the opening lines in your Festschrift essay. “I asked [Ed] casually in an email conversation something like the following: could a good Christian rightly believe that he or she was called to a vocation or an office if the people among whom he or she lived did not recognize that call: Ed’s brief and clear answer: no.” You grant that I

probably didn't know the "contexts in which I was thinking about this question." Even so, I wonder what I might have been thinking with that flatout "no." Surely not about my vocation—and dismissal therefrom—at Concordia Seminary in 1974. More likely your question caused my brain to "click on" to the program of the Augsburg Confession and its article on self-appointed preachers. That's a no-no, says AC 14, unless the candidate has a call from the outside, from some community, to corroborate the one on the inside. Now I know that you weren't thinking about that context at all, but were referencing what's in the title of your Festschrift gift to me: "Conscience, Commitment and Disobedience: The Case of Same-Sex Relationships." Given the massive case you make from Luther on conscience coupled with your own marvelous gift of reasoned reflection, I wouldn't dare to say "no" this time. As you know, on this hot-potato item we are on the same wavelength. So your birthday present essay brings joy. Still I have this question: Where did you learn all that Lutheran theology, the deep stuff, that you weave into this *amicus curiae* offering? Surely not from the days of our initial personal crossings in Valparaiso University theology classes.

Were you at V.U. at the time when some wag tagged me with the moniker "Crazy Ed?" [I'm not sure it was a term of endearment.] Valpo alums who later became seminarians in St. Louis brought it along, and so here too I was so labelled. I think someone even mentions it in the Festschrift.

However, seems to me that the real crazies are the contributors to this Festschrift. Not the least of them you with this track record. Studying law in the first

place(!), getting that Yale degree, wangling that post at Hamline Law School, editing the Law & Religion journal, taking on adoptive children as a single parent, getting to the deep stuff in Lutheran theology and crossing it like a pro with the world of your own vocation: jurisprudence. Are you really practicing the “-prudence” part of that vocation? Sounds more like crazy to me. What else but crazy was your recent foray out to Fordham University—granted, they invited you—to “splain” to the Jesuits there Luther’s (law-gospel-grounded) view of conscience and then have the chutzpah to cross it over to their own concerns about Vatican documents that they must cope with. I know what you told them. You sent me the paper. Crazy.

Bob Bertram liked to tell this story of Niels Bohr, pioneer quantum physics theorist. In one of Bohr’s graduate seminars a student was proposing a wild new theory and scribbling the blackboard full of equations to show its plausibility. When he finished, Bohr, having followed the argument closely, told the student: “Your proposal is crazy. The trouble is that it is not crazy enough!”

The opposite is my take on Marie Failing. Crazy enough. Thanks be to God.

17. Michael Hoy

18. Steven C Kuhl

Crazy enough—that’s surely true of you two too. So I’ll bunch you together, a dynamic duo for bringing the Festschrift to closure. It’s also true that my energy level is a tad lower than it was when I started this todah. So I won’t pick up right now on the good stuff you give me. Some later time when (better) we can do so face-



*to-face, even though we have shop-talked both topics earlier on. They are at the center of our common life and planetary survival: "The Ethics of War and Peace" and "God in the Science and Politics of Food." Later. But back to crazy enough. The two of you—Mike first, Steve currently—have been crazy enough to accept the leadership of The Crossings Community after we goldie-oldies relinquished the reins. Crazy enough to keep the S.A.L.T. conversations going. You, Steve, continue to be crazy enough to keep on keeping on as a Lutheran prof in a Roman Catholic Seminary. You, Mike, wear several hats, some of them the equivalent of full-time jobs on their own. And you too keep on keeping on. I know that there is more of the same that I don't know.*

*So, crazy enough you are—like your respective namesakes—Protomartyr Stephen (Monday was his Saint's Day) and Proto-Messenger Michael of Revelation 12. You look, and sound, very much like your prototypes. Thanks be to God.*

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## **Darwin, Design and Christmas**

Colleagues,

1. Only in America! Only in America could this farce continue. This week we Americans have been given a definitive ruling. A judge has said: One way of comprehending about the world we live in is religion, the

other way is not. Case closed.

2. Only in America, where religion thrives, is it a no-no to be “religious” about the origin of things—including yourself. Not that it’s a no-no to have such beliefs, but they are not public domain topics. Surely not in the schools where we learn the truth and the skills to survive.
3. The Origin of Species is no longer discussable, let alone debatable. It’s a done deal. We have a clear winner. And clear losers. Once the courts have spoken it’s “established.”
4. But origins and destinies are inescapably theological topics. No one of us can get back to the beginnings and tell the rest of us how it all started, nor can any one of us jump to the grand finale and flash back where things wind up. Origins and destinies, by definition, entangle us in God-talk. But that is, of course, only one point of view, and that viewpoint has its own set of definitions for the terms “origin” and “destiny.” The non-God-talk folks disagree. “Without-God” (a-theism) is more plausible for them. But such atheism is still an “-ism.” An ideology. An alternate religion. [In Britain that is now “official” in census reporting: atheism is one form of religion.]
5. Which raises the first question that came to my mind when I read “the judge’s” ruling this week: Where did you get that definition of science? Of religion? Whose definitions are these? Who owns the language? Is there a scientific answer to these definition questions?
6. So one proposal for seeing the world is labelled religion—and therefore a no-no in public schools—and the opposite “religion” gets carte blanche. Sounds exactly what the founding fathers said was not to be: No establishment of religion! By which they doubtless had

something quite simple in mind. Anglicanism shall not be the state church of the USA. But Anglicans shall not be restrained from being Anglicans. Baptists, Lutherans, etc. too.

7. Would it really damage pupils being prepared to live on our planet in the 21st century to learn that folks—especially in America—differ on the issue of origins? E.g., Some folks in our country (and the rest of the world too) think you don't have to do God-talk to understand the origins of things, other folks think you do. Here are the warrants frequently given for one point of view, here are the warrants regularly cited for the other. And (with the two names that come to my mind right now) in both cases, they are molecular biologists, professors at x & y universities. The god-talk advocate I mentioned speaks as a Christian, he says. Other world religions do their god-talk about origins in other ways. Here are some samples.
8. Only in America, I suspect, is the Enlightenment still a modern nation's public ideology. Even though "post-modernity" [the Aha! that nobody reads reality objectively; we all read through tinted-glasses] may even have been invented on our shores, our public ideology is still tar-baby stuck on antiquated opposite axioms. "Science provides objective truth. Untrammelled reason can get you there. It is indeed possible (even easy once you learn how) to read reality without any lenses 'interfering' between reader and reality."
9. Walter Brueggemann, doyen of American Old Testament studies, had a brilliant article in the Christian Century recently (Nov. 29, 2005). Its title: "Counterscript." Where I've been speaking of lenses, he uses a wider net: scripts. He doesn't get into the Script and Counterscript discussed above, but he could have. Here's what he says:

19 theses.

- a. Everybody has a script.
- b. We are scripted by a process of nurture, formation and socialization that might go under the rubric of liturgy.
- c. The dominant script of both selves and communities in our society . . is the script of therapeutic, technological, consumerist militarism that permeates every dimension of our common life.
- d. The script—enacted through advertising, propaganda and ideology, especially in the several liturgies of television—promises to make us safe and happy.
- e. That script has failed.
- f. Health depends, for society and for its members, on disengaging from and relinquishing the failed script.
- g. It is the task of the church and its ministry to detach us from that powerful script.
- h. The task of describing, relinquishment and disengagement is undertaken through the steady, patient, intentional articulation of an alternative script that we testify will indeed make us safe and joyous.
- i. The alternative script is rooted in the Bible and enacted through the tradition of the church.
- j. The defining factor of the alternative script is the God of the Bible, who, fleshed in Jesus, is variously Lord and Savior of Israel and Creator of heaven and earth, and whom we name as Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
- k. The script of this God is not monolithic, one-dimensional or seamless, and we should not pretend that we have such an easy case to make in telling about this God.

- l. The ragged, disjunctive quality of the counterscript to which we testify cannot be smoothed out.
  - m. . . . [and] is so disputed and polyvalent that its adherents are always tempted to quarrel among themselves.
  - n. The entry point into the counterscript is baptism.
  - o. The nurture, formation and socialization into the counterscript with this elusive, irascible God at its center constitute the work of ministry.
  - p. Ministry is conducted in the awareness that most of us are deeply ambivalent [anxious, double-minded] about the alternative script.
  - q. The good news is that our ambivalence as we stand between scripts is precisely the primal venue for the work of God's Spirit.
  - r. Ministry and mission entail managing that inescapable ambivalence that is the human predicament in faithful, generative ways.
  - s. The work of ministry is indispensable.
- So far Brueggemann.

- 10. Is the Darwin/Design hassle about this? Central to the debate is also just what THE debate actually is. Is it scripts and counterscripts? Some of it surely is. Especially the parts that get folks all riled up—on both sides! Doesn't "survival of the fittest" contradict Christ's rehabbing rejects, the patently unfit? Which script rules world history?
- 11. Brueggemann's words couldn't be more true here too—predicament, ambivalence, anxious, even double-minded. But he's no fatalist. "Ministry is indispensable." The assignment is to "testify . . . the alternative script," namely, "the God of the Bible, who, fleshed in Jesus, is variously Lord and Savior of Israel and Creator of heaven

and earth, and whom we name as Father, Son and Holy Spirit."

12. I've been so teased by Brueggemann's script/counterscript essay, that I've (almost) decided to take that route for the homily I'm slotted to do at our congregation this Christmas Sunday. The Gospel for the day is the prolog of St. John's Gospel. It's John Christmas story. I'm tempted to read it to the assembly in a Revised Schroeder Version "In the beginning, when things got started, someone was reciting a script. It was coming from God's direction. God Himself was reciting the script. Right from the very beginning God was reciting scripts. Everything in the world came into existence when God spoke a script for it. And if God didn't speak a script for something, it didn't exist. Life happens when God does scripts. And with such scripted life, light shines for everyone. [Who needs light? It's all in the script.] People in the dark need light. So God's scripted light shines into the darkness, and the darkness can't stop it.

There was a man sent from God, named John. He came to recite God's light-script out loud, so that folks would trust the Script-writer. He himself was not the Script-writer, he came only to speak the light-lines out loud to us. His message was that genuine light, actually the Script Himself (!), was coming into the world to illuminate the folks in darkness, i.e., folks living their lives by other scripts.

The Script-in-person was inside the cosmos, on stage where the drama was going on. 'Fact is, the cosmos and its drama wouldn't even exist if he had not scripted it. Yet the folks on stage were clueless about him. The Script-writer came on stage, the stage of his own drama, but to those on stage he sounded alien. Their verdict: your lines don't

fit my script.

But some did tune into his script, and those who did, who entrusted themselves to his script, got new scripts themselves. Their new roles, still on the same stage, went along with their new titles: “God’s own kids.” The DNA for such status does not come from blood-lines or bio-genetics, but from the Script-writer himself. They are the Script-writer’s own offspring, connected with Son #1. [See below.]

[So here’s the big picture behind 0 Little Town of Bethlehem.] The cosmic Script-Writer took on our flesh and blood, set up shop on the same stage where we’re scripted to be. We’ve seen the glow coming from him, glowing as the #1 son of the Script-Writer – 100% Grace, 100% Truth. Grace means incredible good news for folks who get hooked on scripts of darkness. And Truth too. His script tells it like it really is.”

So far John 1:1-14 (RSV). Now to craft a sermon.

Peace & Joy!  
Ed Schroeder

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# **Michael and the Dragon—On Earth the Battle Continues.**

# Two Case Studies: Narnia and India

Colleagues,

## Case Study #1. Narnia

Marie and I saw the Narnia movie yesterday, “The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe,” C.S. Lewis’ classic tale of Christ the Redeemer [a.k.a. Aslan, “not a tame lion”] confronting the power of evil in an imaginary world. Yet it is the world we live in ourselves, Lewis wants to tell us. Narnia is OUR world on this side of that mysterious wardrobe door. Though the decisive battle is over (the Christ-figure wins), lethal local warfare continues.

Granted, the daily news keeps the power of evil—both in “them” and in “us”—constantly before our eyes, but we don’t readily see through the headlines to get the cosmic picture, the Big Screen behind the TV screen. And besides, even we modern Christian folk have demythologized “that ancient serpent.” For the most part, it is only the biblicists, or the paranoid—so we think—who tune in on this Big Screen. Most of us, I suspect, hear the lectionary text for St. Michael and All Angels (Revelation 12), the cosmic struggle between Michael

and his angels (we who call ourselves his disciples) and the Dragon with his human cohorts, but we don’t really think it’s about us. Who believes in, let alone fears, that ancient serpent? It’s the terrorists who are the evil empire. That’s what makes us humans an endangered species. Dragon shmagon! No, that was then, but this is now.

So it takes something like C.S. Lewis’ classic tale to show us again the big picture, the Cine-MAX, the cosmic screen on which



our own stories are unfolding. Even then, after leaving the theater, it takes effort to keep believing that my own world is the world we've just seen on the screen. It is epic fantasy-fiction, and super-high tech to boot in the film. But is it really us? That all depends on the glasses you're wearing to watch it all. If there is a cross etched on the lens, you'll see more.

In that Narnian world Aslan, the Lion of redemption, struggles to the death (his own) with the Witch of Unending Winter to rescue traitors like us, who have joined her cause. Deep down, she's not really "super-wicked." What she asks for is nothing more than just deserts for the culprits, that the "deep magic" of retribution for sinners merely be carried out. Her icy image in the film, with visage to match, knows nothing of mercy. She will settle only for equity-justice--nothing more, nothing less. Reminds me of that quip from the 70s: "The young demand justice; the old will settle for mercy." Aslan is the agent for "even deeper magic," whereby God's Gospel trumps God's law. But, of course, it's very "costly" gospel.

Lewis' Narnia series is a seven-book series. As our kids were growing up we read all of them out loud. Twice over. So when we have family gatherings these days it's fun to watch three 40-somethings try to stump each other with Narnia trivia quizzes. In these texts Lewis reads the modern world (in his day the world of WW II) as the writers of the New Testament read their own world. "Our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places" (Ephesians 6).

Or again back to Revelation 12: "War broke out in the heavenly courtroom--Michael and the Dragon." After the decisive battle [Good Friday and Easter] concludes before the divine bench, with

Michael/Christ winning--mercy-justice trumping equity-justice--  
"there was no longer any place for the Dragon in the heavenly  
courtroom." But not so "on earth." There the warfare continues--  
twixt Michael and his crew and the Dragon and his crew. The  
dragon's down-on-the-ground strategies are signalled by his  
titles: Devil (in Greek, the wrecker), Satan (Hebrew for  
prosecuting attorney) and Deceiver. On the receiving end of this  
evil empire is "the whole world." And the wrecker, prosecutor,  
deceiver is not a happy camper. "For he has come down (to the  
earth and sea) with great wrath, because he knows that his time  
is short!"

When you get to the finale in the movie, there is planet-wide  
war in Narnia--creatures of earth, sea and air too taking sides--  
-and, yes, being slaughtered. Whether that is the final  
apocalypse, you don't know, though it seems as if the White  
Witch escapes to mount another angry onslaught another time.

But is this really our world? Depends on our eyes. Are we those  
who claimed 20-20 vision (John 9) and yet were diagnosed as  
blind by Jesus? Reading the daily news, and our own lives, but  
not seeing beyond the nose on our face? The Gospel for Christmas  
day, the prolog (chapter 1) of John's gospel, shows us the  
lenses he uses. John shows us the Big Screen on which "Little  
Town of Bethlehem" is playing. It is cosmos-wide. To get the big  
picture about Bethlehem, says John, you've got to go back to "in  
the beginning." Three times in this Christmas-day text John  
mentions "the cosmos" to signal his wide-angle lens. And he  
carries through with this Big Screen till the end of his gospel.  
But I digress. Back to Narnia.

If these NT texts are valid, then Narnia tells it like it is.

The reality of evil in God's creation is "bigger" than flesh and  
blood. That is a constant theme throughout the scriptures. When

in our daily lives we encounter (or are the agents for) destruction, deception, accusation, then powers bigger than our own person-power are in the mix, powers that require a lot more than our own energy to cope with--and to overcome. So the "angels of Michael" (Christ-disciples) down on the ground in Revelation 12 do not go against the dragon's accusation, destruction, deceit with their own resources, but they "conquer him by the blood of the Lamb, and by their words of testimony claiming that cosmic victory."

No wonder in John's gospel that Jesus himself is called "parakletos," the Greek term for Defense Attorney. To confront a cosmic prosecutor we need a cosmic defender. When down here "on earth" (where, remember, the BIG battle still rages) we ourselves confront destroyers, deceivers, accusers--even smallish ones--our own resources won't suffice. We need a "bigger and better" defense attorney. Whom indeed we have, who has already done in the dragon in the decisive battle. Easter was "tetelesthai," Greek for "case closed."

Our Easter paraclete urges us to repeat his testimony about us to the destroyers, deceivers, accusers assailing us. Should we forget his testimony--it has been known to occur--he has supplied "another paraclete, the Spirit of truth . . . whom I will send you from the Father" (Jn 15: 26). That second defender's job-description in John is nothing more than "to take what is mine and declare it (again) to you."

But, you may still ask (and I ask myself too): is all that really so? It does seem so far away from how we "process" experience day in and day out. As far away as Narnia. But that may be the myopic malaise of our post-Christian western world. The world of the New Testament (Narnia) was the world we entered on some of our mission volunteer stints in the past 12 years--specifically Ethiopia and Indonesia. It was the world of "cosmic

powers of darkness" confronting "the light that shines into the darkness." And the darkness was not extinguishing it.

And it still is for fellow Christians we cherish there.

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## **Case Study #2. India**

Here's an example from some Christmas mail we just received. Darlene Large, when she is stateside, lives almost next door to us in St. Charles, Missouri. But half of her life (maybe more) each year unfolds in India with child care homes of the agency she created called HOINA, Homes of the Indian Nation. Her regular newsletter "is published to inform our readers of the work HOINA does among the handicapped and abandoned in India." Here's an excerpt from December 2005.

### **THE BLESSING GROVE**

The month of December is here, and everyone in HOINA is busy. We are planning ways to thank God this coming year for all of His mighty blessings and miracles to us. I would like to tell you a story that has gone on for the past three years. About three years ago we were just starting to build a boys' home on our 21 acres of land. After getting the walls up on the dormitories, a villager put a court case against us. Many of you prayed us through that troubling time. I ended up writing the Chief Minister, Chandra Babu Naidu, for help. He replied the next day. Because of him, the magistrate threw the bogus case out of the court, and we were able to continue building.

At the same time, another group whose leader is a pedophile moved into our neighborhood. They bought more than 60 acres of land near us, and I was worried. I took our engineer, Giri; our watchman; and another staff person into the mango grove across the driveway. We stood there while I prayed. My prayer was one

of praise and thanksgiving. It was also a prayer asking for God's protection. I asked Him specifically to send Michael the Archangel to come with his angels to surround the property and keep us safe from evil and allow us to continue our building. As I finished the prayer, I started to open my eyes; but it was nearly impossible because in front of me stood a tall, shining figure. It was like looking directly into the sun. I closed my eyes for one or two moments and prayed a bit longer. In that brief moment, raindrops began to fall on us. When I next opened my eyes, the entire sky from one end of the valley to the other was black with heavy rain clouds. I realized then that this was a heavenly person who had stood in front of me. It could not have been the sun.

A few days later, I went down to Madras to our girls' home. I received a phone call from an old friend. She is a sister with Mother Theresa's nuns, Missionaries of Charity. She wanted to know if we had space for a boy with cerebral palsy. After sorting that out, I told her about what I had seen. She said, "Do you know who that was?"

"No, Sister, I don't have a clue."

She said, "The Lord sent you Michael the Archangel. He is so powerful. You don't have a thing to worry about."

"How do you know this?" I asked.

"I know. The Lord is telling my heart right now."

"Sister," I replied, "that is just what I prayed."

"Well, God is answering your prayer. He is a mighty God."

About a year went by. We built the house. Things went on well. Giri said, "Mom, we need more toilets in this plan. We can build a block of them in the far back of the property and connect them

with a hallway to the main building. But to do this, we need a well." I walked about the property, mostly in the back of the house. Giri called in a hydrogeologist to look into the problem. "Mom, come and see. We found the water," Giri called to me. He took me across the driveway to the mango grove, to the space where the angel had stood. By this time, the mango grove had been properly named, the Blessing Grove.

The next surprise came from a wonderful Christian, an American friend working in Canada. He sent me an email. "I have not been able to sleep for four days. He keeps telling me that you need money for the boys' home. I thought you built the boys' home already. Why would you need money now? I am, however, His obedient servant, and after four sleepless nights, I decided to obey Him and send the money so I wrote a check for 1000 dollars and sent it to your office." I was stunned! Amazing Lord! We needed a bit over 900 dollars for the well. The problem was solved again, and Jesus did it all.

Peace & joy!

Ed Schroeder

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## **Is “church” an “active noun,” the subject of sentences? In the NT never**

Colleagues,

It's so commonplace in our rhetoric these days that “the church” is the grammatical subject of sentences. “The church is doing

this or that, or it isn't, but it ought to." One of you sent me a jeremiad this week bemoaning what all "the church" is not doing that it should be doing. Which nudged me to check the New Testament. Granted, the NT epistles are full of such critique of the congregations to whom they were addressed. But never once is there a sentence like the one in quotes above—either commendatory or critical—about "the church" doing or not doing something. Even more, never once is "the church" the subject of ANY sentence! That's the case for every one of the 112 listings for the Greek word "ekklesia" that I found in the NT.

Never does "the church" show up in the nominative case, namely, as the subject of a sentence. It's always in the objective case. Either as the direct object on the receiving end of someone else's action—"Christ loved the church; I (Paul) persecuted the church"—or following a preposition—"in, of, to, by, with, for the church"). In two places that I found, the plural "churches" does become the subject of a sentence. End of Romans and end of I Corinthians: "The churches of Christ (of Asia) salute you." But that's hardly a mandate for what "the church" ought to be doing.

But why this disparity when compared with our penchant to make "the church" the subject of sentences, HEAVY sentences, that go far beyond "your fellow Christians in the neighborhood say hello"—when the rock whence we are hewn (or claim to be) never does? Are we talking about the same thing? My hunch is no. Herewith some rambling thoughts.

1. During the Fall and Spring semesters at St. Louis University, a Jesuit institution, a couple of us still-surviving Seminex folks show up (we're invited) for a brown-bag lunch and theological conversation every Friday noon. There are other non-Romans around the table too. With no second thought we all regularly make "church" the

subject of sentences in our conversation. But what/who are we talking about? When the Roman folks do so, they most often mean THE church, the Roman Catholic Church. Occasionally after all these years, ecumenical etiquette will sometimes intervene. "Yes, of course, you folks are church too, but here I'm just talking about Roman Catholicism." I wonder if that is a clue. Also when we non-Romans put "church" in the nominative case in our thoughts and words.

2. Might it be that when "church" comes to mean an institution—not only the Roman church, but the ELCA, PCUSA, ECUSA as well—it becomes an "active noun," the subject of sentences? And what nudges us to do so is that we can "see" that entity, the people, the building where they work, the address where our contributions go. Au contraire in the NT "church" is only a "passive noun," always in the objective case grammatically—on the receiving end of the action of some other subject. "Christ loved, Saul persecuted, the church." Does that mean that there is no assigned "agenda" ("what you ought to be doing") to put the church into the nominative case, make it the subject of sentences with verbs to follow? If there is an agenda for what the church ought to be doing, what is it? Why no NT testimony in that direction?
3. Another thing I noticed is that "the church" is never criticized in NT texts. With one possible exception, the book of Revelation. There the "seven churches"—clearly designated as worshipping communities in "7 cities of Asia" — are critiqued. But even here it is a bit indirect: "To the angel of the church in Thyatira (et al.), write . . ." and then comes the riot act. Even here they are not critiqued as being failures as "church." Their "churchiness" is their de facto "coming-together at such-and-such a location." Even though in Paul's many epistles,



the Corinthian congregation, Galatian congregation and others are subject to his stern diagnosis, it is never the “church” that gets the harsh words. How come?

4. If the apostle doesn’t envision “the church” in Corinth to be the subject of a sentence, to have an action assignment, an agenda to fulfill, then whatever their de facto failures, they couldn’t be failing “in the nominative case.” Is there perhaps a “passive agenda” for the church? Is there a right way, a wrong way, to be on the receiving end of the action of some other—more specifically One Specific Other—and thus to be, or not to be, “church?” If so, it’s clear that the church in Corinth (et al.) is failing that. Their rightful location on the receiving end of rightfully done action coming from The Subject of their existence as Christians is skewered. Even so, as “church” they elicit no negative verdict from the apostle. Why doesn’t Paul tell them: “As church, you’re a failure?”
5. Makes me wonder how the Augsburg Confessors used the word church. I have no access to a concordance to the Book of Concord, so I’ll just grab from memory. Augsburg Confession VII “It is also taught among us that one holy Christian church will be and remain forever. This is the assembly of all believers among whom the Gospel is preached in its purity and the holy sacraments are administered according to the Gospel.” Sounds mostly like being on the receiving end. Especially when you think of the alternative Roman notion of church, against which which the confessors were confessing—very much an active subject of the sentence right here at Augsburg calling the confessors to shape up or else.
6. Curiously the earlier Augsburg article V on “ministry” does not use the word church at all. But that may not be so strange when you consider what they confessed

“ministry” to be. Not clergy, nothing at all about the ordained. Not even diaconal service expected from Christians, although “diakonia” is the classic term. AC V “ministry” is not first of all focused on ministERS. Rather it is the God-instituted transmission mechanism(s), the pipeline(s), whereby Christ’s forgiveness (AC III) can get to sinners in subsequent centuries so that they too be rendered righteous by faith (Art. IV). Which prompts the question: How do you get such faith? Answer (AC V): “In order that we may obtain such faith, God instituted the ministry of teaching the Gospel and administering the sacraments. Through these media (pipelines) he gives the Holy Spirit, who works faith . . . in those who hear (are on the receiving end) of the Gospel.” It is these media that create church. Church is people on the receiving end of the pipelines.

7. But who manages these media? Article XIV. “Our churches teach that nobody should preach publicly in the church or administer the sacraments unless he is regularly called.” That’s a very skimpy sentence for getting to “official” pastors. In Melanchthon’s subsequent commentary on AC 14, he says more. But we never get to anything about “ordained clergy.” He says that “self-appointed” pastors are a no-no, but the Augsburg accent is not on “who” is the right person to do it. Instead the point is that these media get done “right,” that what God put into the pipeline on Good Friday, Easter, Pentecost, actually comes out “purely” [unadulterated by “other” Gospels] at the other end where the folks are gathered in times thereafter. That pipeline-flow is what takes non-church sinners and makes them church (forgiven sinners). Nothing else church-ifies humans. So Melanchthon can conclude: “We know that the church is present among those who rightly teach the Word of God and rightly administer the sacraments.” Sounds like

church equals folks gathered at the receiving end again.

8. One more from the BoC, from Luther's catechisms, his explanation of the third article of the creed. "I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ my Lord, or come to him. [No pipeline, no connection to Christ.] But the Holy Ghost has called me by the [preaching of the] Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith. Just as He calls, gathers, enlightens and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth, and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith." No pipeline-flowing, no church.
9. Luther's Large Catechism further elaborates: "Where Christ is not preached, there is no Holy Spirit to create, call, and gather the Christian church, and outside it no one can come to the Lord Christ." "Therefore there [is] no Christian church." Commenting on the term "communion of saints" in the credal text he says that better than the word "communion" would be the word "community." "This is the sum and substance of 'communion of saints': I believe that there is on earth a little holy flock or community of pure saints under one head Christ. . . . Of this community I also am a participant and co-partner in all the blessings it possesses. I was brought to it by the Holy Spirit and incorporated into it by the fact that I have heard and still hear God's [Gospel] Word, which is the first step in entering it. . . . Until the last day the Holy Spirit remains with this holy community of Christian people. Through it he gathers us, using it to teach and preach the Gospel. By it he creates and increases sanctification, causing it daily to grow and become strong in the faith and in the fruits of the Spirit." Sounds pretty close to pipeline-stuff. Christ is the wellhead, the source of the flow. The Holy Spirit sees to it that the pipeline flows. The church is a community gathered at

the end of the pipeline.

10. Now the catechetical question: What does this mean? Might it mean some of the items that follow?

- A. The members of the body have callings to be engaged in world-work, they are indeed subjects of sentences in the nominative case, but “the church” does not.
- B. Since “the church” is both head and body (Christ and those membered into him), it ill behooves the members—even with the best of intentions—to articulate agendas for “the church,” agendas that implicate both head and members. That’s the Head’s prerogative.
- C. The specific action-items he does mandate for his disciples—preach my Gospel, do baptism, do the Lord’s Supper, do absolution in my name—sound like pipeline-flow stuff. The work of getting sinners Christ-connected and keeping them there. They do not mandate any specific sort of action that we might call “world-work.” Their locus and focus is “God-in-Christ and us.” They do not specify any “church-assignment” for the “church in the world.” If they did, there would have to be NT texts using “church” in the nominative case, as the subject of action sentences. Since these do not exist in any NT texts, where are the warrants for sentences changing the grammar? If The Head confines his churchy agenda to pipeline business, who are we to disagree?
- D. [From the November 2005 issue of the LWF magazine LUTHERAN WORLD INFORMATION (an issue entirely devoted to HIV/AIDS)] “The HIV/AIDS crisis is a unique opportunity for the church to prove its witness to the world.” “The church’s task in situations dealing with HIV/AIDS should be to equip congregational members . . . .” “Time is up! The

church must respond now.” “The church cannot be silent about this issue.”

- E. But what about all the work, godly work, e.g., re: HIV/AIDS, that’s needed in our wilting world? All those imperatives, especially the Grace-imperatives, both from you, Jesus, and from the apostles throughout the NT?
- F. Do we have a clue from the NT in the many chapters of ethical admonitions, the “grace-imperatives,” that do indeed put Christians in the nominative case with manifold mandates to “do this” and “refrain from doing that”? Of course, but note they are not mandates predicated to the “church.” Instead they are predicated to the members who already have a multi-faceted “address” in the world with relationships galore. And with every one of those relationships—parents-children, wives-husbands, buyer-seller, learner-teacher, citizen-governor, etc.—there are already agendas galore. Most often more than even Christ-confessors can handle.
- G. A clear signal that the HIV/AIDS agenda is not “church-work” comes in the several articles in the LWI issue where collaboration with Hindus, Muslims, and Buddhists is portrayed. These co-workers are clearly not “church,” nor would they want to be designated as such. But even as God’s creatures apart from Christ, they perceive God’s call to help and they are doing so. Christ-disciples join with them, also initiate helpful actions on their own, all of them as God’s left-handers. Good stuff, godly stuff, Hallelujah stuff. Yet if “pipeline” stuff does not happens, it’s not “church-work.” Care, yes, but not redemption until the pipeline spigot opens. God’s left hand, but not (yet) the right hand. And

therefore not church-work, despite the entire LWI issue claiming the contrary.

- H. There may well be other ways to understand why “church” is never a sentence subject in the NT. I’ve obviously done my reading using Lutheran lenses and the Augsburg Aha! These lenses (at least my peering through them) have been challenged more than once from what I’ve posted over the years. But the concordance reality about “church” in the NT came to me as a surprise. If you have another take on this non-nominative reality about church in the NT, tell me about it.
- I. For it vividly contrasts to our age where the churches (plural) are making statements left and right about what “the church” (singular) has to say about this or that slice of life in our world. Even to say “the church says” is already a bit of chutzpah if the NT never does so. And in the swarm of church denominations today (recent count: 30,000 [sic!])—even if church-in-the-nominative case were kosher—who speaks for “the church?”
- J. The tradition of the Augsburg Aha! does allow certain sentences that begin with “the church says.” More precisely it’s “the head of the church’s body says.” Such sentences are: “Believe the good news. Take and eat. I baptize you . . . Be of good cheer, your sins are forgiven.” When Christ is talking this sort of talk, the church’s head is in the nominative case—and the church’s members (de facto or potential) are in the objective case. It’s pipeline stuff.
- K. But more than once we hear: “Sure, all Christians know that already. Now let’s get to the stuff that’s still frightfully frazzled in our world.” Not so,

says Augsburg. "Pure Gospel" is the unique agenda of "the church." And proclaiming it is beset by multiple hazards. Just to keep it "pure" when proclaimed is already tough. Especially when you move to "cross it over" into the real life of just one real person. So for "the church" to devote its full time to that task is hardly frivolous.

- L. As I was working on this posting, I happened to glance out the window (we're in a 4th story condo) at a bird-feeder on the lawn below. Was that my analogy? The birds gather (and chatter) at the feeder. Their main purpose, of course, is to feed, and that they indeed do—with vigor. Then they fly away to their normal "secular" daily lives. At the feeder they don't get a new agenda, or even extra info, for living in their world. They seem to get such programs from other sources. And they don't hang around the bird-feeder all day. But they are indeed nourished by what they find there. Exactly how it benefits their secular agendas I can only theorize. But it surely does. If I could get in on their chatter, I'd doubtless learn more. A condo neighbor fills the feeder every day, thus inviting them to come back tomorrow for more.

Granted all similes limp. But this one teases me.

Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder

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# What is Christian Spirituality? Answer: Faith in Christ

Colleagues,

Today's ThTh posting #390 comes from Timothy Hoyer, Pastor of Gloria Dei Lutheran congregation (ELCA) in Lakewood, New York. Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

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## ***Faith in Christ is Christian Spirituality***

*People are trying to get closer to God. That desire to get closer to God, to feel closer to God, along with what one does to feel closer, is called "spirituality," or worship. That desire to experience God and to know what God wants was expressed by a man named Philip. He asked his spiritual mentor the question of all people who want to be close to God. "Philip said to Jesus, 'Lord, show us the Father, and we shall be satisfied.' Jesus said to him, 'Have I been with you so long, and yet you do not know me, Philip? He who has seen me has seen the Father; how can you say, 'Show us the Father'? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father in me?'" (John 14.8-10). Another spiritual advisor wrote and said, "Whoever confesses the Son has the Father also" (1 John 2.23); and, "Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in them, and they in God" (1 John 4.15-16). The witnesses who knew*



Jesus testify that the way to experience God, to be close to God, to know God's will for you, was to have faith in Jesus as the "expiation for our sins" (1 John 4.10).

To give people spiritual closeness to God, so close that God is called "Father," Jesus gave his followers five spiritual practices. The first is the spoken word, by which the forgiveness of sin through Christ is preached to all; second is baptism, where one is made a child of the Father; the third is The Lord's Supper, where one tastes and eats the presence of Christ and his forgiveness, so that we abide in him and he in us; fourth, the speaking of forgiveness through Christ, one person to another; and fifth, "through the mutual conversation and consolation of Christians" (Book of Concord [BoC], Tappert Edition, Smalcald Articles, Article 4. The Gospel). This fifth way is also described, "Beloved, let us love one another; for love is of God, and whoever loves is born of God and knows God" (1 John 4.7), and, "Bear one another's burdens" (Gal. 6.2). Christ's spiritual practices are all done out loud, verbally, so people can hear Christ's promise and believe in him.

Those are the spiritual techniques or practices that Christians have to know and experience God as their Father, who forgives them for Christ's sake because he died for all people. That is why the Reformers wrote, "The chief worship of God is the preaching of the Gospel" (BoC, 221.42).

### **Three Places That Talk About "Another" Spirituality**

There is another spirituality that is often sought after and urged upon Christians. This other spirituality consists of different techniques and practices that are claimed to bring the spiritual seeker closer to God and to know the mind of God. This other spirituality is based on a person's actions, practices, and techniques as the way to feel closer to God,

that is, more approved of by God, more loved by God, as if the closeness Jesus offers is insufficient. This other spirituality does not include the verbal proclamation of Jesus' promise to forgive. But when the Promise is not spoken, there can be no faith, no closeness to God's mercy for sinners.

1. The Newsweek Magazine Spirituality was the cover story of Newsweek's September 5, 2005 edition. In a poll by Newsweek and Beliefnet seventy-four percent of the people responding said they were spiritual (Newsweek, September 5, 2005, p. 48). The article "In Search of the Spiritual" states that this search "was a passion for an immediate, transcendent experience of God" (ibid, p.49). "There is a streak in the United States of relying on what Pacific Lutheran University's Professor Patricia Killen calls 'individual visceral experience' to validate religious ideas" (ibid, p.52). Echoing that is Tony Campolo, who asks, "You can have solid theology and be orthodox to the core, but have you experienced God in your own life?" (ibid. p. 50) In other words, God is real if you can feel God in you, if you feel joy, if you feel the love, or if you feel empowered and speak in tongues.

The spiritual techniques mentioned are centering prayer, yoga, meditation, reading a holy book (Bible, Koran), and prayer groups. Those are techniques that focus on what the person does to get close to God. The more and better one practices, the closer one becomes to God. In contrast, the Lutheran Reformers wrote, "Faith is that worship which receives God's offered blessings; the righteousness of the law is that worship which offers God our own merits. It is by faith that God wants to be worshiped, namely, that we receive from him what he promises and offers" (BoC, 114:50). Faith in God's mercy for sinners is received because it is a gift, it is not

*something that is obtained by practice.*

*The kind of spirituality reported on by Newsweek teaches people that as long as one has a feeling of being close to God (obtained by one's spiritual technique), then God is for you, then you are important to God, and so your life has meaning and purpose. The article never mentions Jesus' dying and rising to forgive people as the means by which God reconciles (becomes close to) people. The article's message is that closeness to God is determined by what each person does instead of closeness to God being given to believers in Christ, as the Reformers wrote, "This obedience toward God, this desire to receive the offered promise, is no less an act of worship than is love. God wants us to believe him and to accept blessings from him; this he declares to be true worship" (BoC, 139:228).*

- 2. Renewing the Passion: a guide to spiritual revival. A Resource of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), c.2005 Evangelism is the impetus in the ELCA for spiritual renewal. "We want renewal because there is a thirst in our community of churches for a closer relationship with God" (Renewing the Passion, p. 3). People in the ELCA "seek to understand God's will and keep it" (ibid, p.10). "We desire a deeper relationship with God" (ibid, p.13).*

*Renewing the Passion prescribes that in order to get a deeper relationship with God "We prepare by returning to the rituals, the places, and the forms that re-energize us and open us to God" (ibid). Suggested are: Lectio Divina, Prayer with sound and silence, Healing Prayer, and Interior Prayer (ibid, p. 17). Prayer and silence is to use "music, chanting, the beat of the drum as a tool to enter more deeply into God's presence in a time of*

silence" (ibid). Worship is a time for an assembly "to embrace the will of God as revealed in their learning and experience" (ibid, p.31).

It can be said (though wrongly) that closeness to God, this spiritual renewal, is something Christians pursue after they have faith in Christ. So, after a Christian has faith in Jesus, they are free to use spiritual techniques in order to feel closer to God. However, spirituality and its techniques do not make good use of Christ's forgiving us. Spirituality and its techniques in *Renewing the Passion* ignore the promises of Christ, never mentioning them. By emphasizing technique, such as silent meditation, instead of describing different ways verbally to proclaim forgiveness, *Renewing the Passion* treats Christ's promises as ineffective and insufficient, as if Christ's promises are not enough to give people closeness to God, that is, faith in God as their Father who forgives them because of Christ. Thus, the teaching of faith in Christ is eroded. "Nowhere do they teach that sins are forgiven freely for Christ's sake and that by this faith we obtain the remission of sins. Thus they obscure the glory of Christ, and abolish true worship (that is, the exercise of faith struggling against despair)" (BoC, 328:44).

The world makes people feel distant and apart from God. The fact that God is hidden from our five senses and from our mind makes people feel far from God. Luther writes that everyone has a general knowledge of God-that God is. But people do not have a particular knowledge of God-how God relates to them with mercy and forgiveness through Christ. Normal, everyday living makes people feel unloved, for they feel compelled to do the right behavior in order to get God's love. (That compelling is called

the law.) There is a constant pressure to perform, to get one's work done, errands done, chores done, bills paid, phone calls returned; there is daily conflict with other people, things breaking-cars, copiers, computers-waiting in long lines, standing on a crowded bus or subway, kids yelling and the TV volume too high. People do not feel close to God at such times. They feel rushed, pressured, strained, and without an inner peace or feeling loved and special. They feel far from God.

To overcome that world people need one who is born of God. For the one who "is born of God conquers the world. And this is the victory that conquers the world, our faith. Who is it that conquers the world but the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?" (1 John 5.4-5)

People also do spirituality practices to try and discover what God wants, to better know the will or mind of God. That is only a general knowledge of God. Jesus has made people a promise. "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14.9). Jesus is in the Father and the Father is in Jesus. To know Jesus is to know God in the closest, most loving and forgiving way there is. That is the particular knowledge of God.

The witnesses of Christ tell of how close Christ makes himself to us. They say that Christ is actually in us. "By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. And we have seen and do testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Savior of the world. God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God. So we have known and believe the love that God has for us" (1 John 4.13-16a).

3. *The Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago (LSTC)* LSTC for the first time has hired someone to be its Director of Spiritual Formation and Dean of Chapel. The Seminary's concern was that "pastors who had graduated from seminary in earlier decades began to burn out because a variety of spiritual practices were missing from their professional repertoire (*EPISTLE, Magazine of the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago*, Fall 2005, p. 2). The Director of Spiritual Formation is responsible to teach seminary students "how to deepen their spiritual lives as a basis for ministry" (*ibid*). The Director is to "offer specific practices and disciplines to aid in such a growth of faith" (*ibid*).

The joining of spiritual formation with worship in this new position is odd. The joining equates spiritual practices with hearing the Gospel, as if both do the same thing. However, "the chief worship of God is the preaching of the Gospel" (BoC, 221.42). Since "faith comes through what is heard, and what is heard is the preaching of Christ" (Romans 10.17), and since the spiritual practices mentioned in *Newsweek* and *Renewing the Passion* do not preach Christ, then such spiritual practices by themselves cannot give faith or grow faith or make someone closer to God or better know God's will. Without being able to give faith, spiritual practices alone cannot assist in preventing the burnout of pastors. The Reformers warn against this lack of preaching faith: "Therefore the patriarchs, too, were justified not by the law but by the promise and faith. It is strange that our opponents make so little of faith when they see it praised everywhere as the foremost kind of worship, as in Ps. 50:15: 'Call upon me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you shall glorify me.' This is how God wants to be known and worshiped, that we accept his

*blessings and receive them because of his mercy rather than because of our own merits" (BoC, 115:59).*

*The way for people to learn about Jesus, and the spiritual practice that pastors need, is to hear that Jesus forgives them by his death and rising. They hear that forgiveness when they listen to the stories of Jesus that his witnesses wrote down (the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John). People are given Jesus in his Supper, so that by the bread and wine consumed, Jesus is within the person. That is how a person is close to God. When one person forgives another in the name of Christ, that person believes that God's will and mind is to forgive, to have mercy, to declare that person righteous, and to give that person eternal life. That is how one knows the will of God. Those are the spiritual practices pastors need in their "professional repertoire." Christian spirituality is to give Christ and his forgiveness or to receive Christ and his forgiveness. Christ is the one who reconciles us to God. Christ is the one who gives people peace with God. Faith in Christ is to be one with God.*

*To practice spiritual techniques as a way to open one's mind to God is not enough to get close to God, for to think on God without dwelling on Christ is to think on those things that compel us—on the law, and thus on accusation, on judgment, and on death. If Christian spirituality is to be taught, the teachers are to teach that Christians get to think on Christ's suffering and death for people, on his forgiving all people, on his finding the lost. To know Christ is to know God and to be close to God.*

*Being close to God is not determined by how well we participate in spiritual techniques, or how often we use a spiritual*

technique, or by the resulting feelings caused by spiritual techniques. Such things replace Christ as the means to be close to God. We can be no closer to God than when we are in Christ and Christ is in us. If we say we are closer to God by another means than faith in Christ, Christ's glory is dimmed. God is closest to us through our faith in Christ dying for us and by our faith that we are forgiven for Christ's sake.

The world does not know God's mercy for sinners through wisdom or techniques or practices. "God decided through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God. God is the source of our life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption"(1 Cor 1.27-30). God chose the Word of Forgiveness, the feeding people the body and blood of Christ, the pouring of water on people along with his spoken promise of forgiveness in Christ, as how God is close to us with mercy and love. Is there any other means of grace, any other spiritual technique by which we can feel "particularly" closer to God? If there is, then we deny that to be with Christ is to be closest to God.

Faith in Christ is our only hope that in times of sickness or pain God is close to us; that in times of despair and exhaustion, God is close to us; that in times of death and mourning, God is closest to us. For only faith in Christ makes us close to God, particularly God's mercy and forgiveness.

Thus, whenever spirituality is taught, whether by spiritual or faith mentors, by bishops' assistants or pastors, those teachers cannot say, "Doing this technique helps make you feel



*closer to God.” That does not use Christ to his glory, for it does not use Christ’s benefits of forgiveness, mercy, reconciliation, or peace. Christian spirituality is to tell people Christ died and rose for them and that for his sake God abides in them with mercy and love. To listen to the Promise is a spiritual technique. To hear the Bible read in a way that Christ’s forgiveness is told is a spiritual technique. To eat the Lord’s Supper with others weekly is a spiritual practice. To forgive another in Christ’s name and to share Christ’s peace and to sing a hymn praising Christ are spiritual practices. Spiritual techniques are worthless unless those techniques give the good news of Christ to the person. Faith-closeness to God comes only through hearing of Christ.*

*Timothy Hoyer*

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## **Theological Perspectives on Max Beckmann’s Paintings**

Colleagues,

Now on the downhill side of “70-something” I slide more easily into nostalgia—and the occasional un-remembered surprises that come from rummaging around in ancient manila folders. Here’s one for USA Thanksgiving 2005. Background. 1984 was the hundredth anniversary of the birth of artist Max Beckmann, renowned German expressionist, pioneer of “New Objectivity,” once a guest-professor in our town (St. Louis) at Washington University. In the fall of 1984 the St. Louis Art Museum put together a huge (220 pieces) Beckmann

Retrospective with all the hoopla thereunto appertaining. One item in that celebration was an evening program at the museum on "Theological Perspectives on Beckmann's Art." One speaker offered a Jewish perspective and I was asked to offer a Christian perspective. Here's what I came up with. [Granted, without the visuals you'll have to use your imagination even more than did the audience that night. Think Thanksgiving: I'll bring the turkey; you supply the stuffing.]

Peace and joy!

Ed Schroeder

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## ***Theological Perspectives on Beckmann: Christian***

*Perspective is a way of seeing. Christian perspective is a way of seeing through the prism of the story of Jesus, whom Christians confess to be the Christ.*

*My point is not to look at Beckmann's work through this prism, at least not initially, but to suggest that Beckmann himself is using a prism very close to the Christian one – whether or not he considered himself allied to the Christian community. He apparently grew up in a nominal Lutheran home, as witnessed by his confirmation picture in the exhibition catalog. When he said: "Bach's St. Matthew Passion is the most colossal thing that there is," he signalled something about his way of seeing.*

*Thus my point is not Beckmann's faith or unfaith, but his way of seeing, his prism, as we can see it working in the art here on display. For my few minutes this evening I wish to concentrate on his way of seeing the human being of the 20th century, which is finally his way of seeing us, who are these*

days looking at his work.

What is a human being? In 1927 he said: "Art is the mirror of God. That mirror is the human race. We ought not to deny that these mirror-images at certain times have been more marvelous [grossartiger] and more terrifying [erschuetternder] than they are today...." "There we have the image of ourselves [unser eigenes Bild]." In that citation he concludes with what sounds like a farewell to any transcendent faith. "We can expect no more help from the outside. It can only come from our own selves."

Whether or not that is an atheist confession, it is a call for us fellow humans to be responsible for the care and nurture of the image of humanity. We are the responsible ones for what our age perceives and practices as the image of the human. Promethean as that protest may sound – and it probably is – it is not all that alien to the Christian story, nor to the Hebrew scriptures upon which that Christian story builds.

The image of the human is both marvelous, mysterious, fantastic (grossartig) and terrifying (erschuetternd) in the Biblical "way of seeing," and we are the ones who are responsible for whichever of those two directions the image is going in our own day.

The marvel-and-mystery image is what both Hebrew and Christian scriptures mean when they designate the human being as a creature distinct from other creatures in that this one is *imago dei*, God's own image. Human beings are designed to be God-mirrors, God-reflectors, mirroring to other creatures – and especially to other humans – the power that brings them into existence and the power that blesses that existence.

In the first chapter of the Bible that is done not with pictures, but with words. The seven-day sequence repeats day

after day until the rest-day: God speaks, things come to be. Then at the end of each day, God speaks another word to bestow value. "God said: 'Let there be...'" And at day's end: "And God ... saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good." The first word of God bestows life and the second values that life, blessing it, bestowing value upon it.

Whatever else God-imagers might have as their assignment, they are called to mirror this power (life-bestowing and value-bestowing) to other God-images and to the non-human creation as well.

In some of Beckmann's humans that reflection of life-bestowing and value-bestowing comes off the canvas from the faces. Quappi, Beckmann's wife, whom he painted often, in my perception is almost always that. Beckmann's own self-portraits, manifold as they are, sometimes do and sometimes don't. His Jesus figures always do that double reflection, but in a way different from Quappi. It is not in the face that you first of all see this life-bestowing, value-bestowing image. Not directly. The Jesus figures link the face of the human with his action. His protection of the woman taken in flagrante with his body inclined toward her, his hands forming a protective circle, his face firm and affirming – that is a whole human being, an integrated imago dei.

The contrast between Jesus and Pilate in the work by that name is almost classic. They both have clearly human faces, but one is empty, disintegrated. The other, though not pretty, is integrated, reflective of the two words of God: life-bestowing and value-bestowing. "Grossartig" was his word. It is "a marvel" for which the appropriate contemporary response is: Wow! If you are of a more inquisitive nature, the proper question is not: Now how does all that compute?, but Why should something so "grossartig" as this happen to me?

*But Beckmann also sees that the human as imago dei is frightfully fractured; erschuetternd is his German term. The fracture is there in his work called "Prodigal Son," which might better be called by its German title, "Lost Son." The fractured image is there also in "The Birds' Hell." Some say this is Beckmann's rendering of Nazism, where human-sized birds—in-human humans—inflict hell's torture on a human victim. The fractured imago dei is there in many of his morbid and pessimistic renderings of human beings and human behavior.*

*Aren't these fractured images of God calling out for help? Even the tormenters in The Birds' Hell are themselves victims. They too cry for help to be restored to integrity, to have their fractured reflectors re-created, so that they too could once more be life-bestowing and value-imparting persons, do they not?*

*In the Biblical story (Hebrew and Christian) the human is grossartig and erschuetternd. Isn't that shown us in the painting of the sinking of the Titanic? Humans create via promethean fantasy and skill (grossartig!) unsinkable ships. But when they entrust themselves to their Titanic technology, it too fails to get them safely across the abyss that underlies human life. The ship goes down. Its devotees go down alongside it. Erschuetterned.*

*Take the two paintings across the gallery room from "The Bird's Hell," "Birth" and "Death." Grossartig and erschuetternd. Not just that birth is marvelous and death terrifying, though that is indeed so. Birth is both grossartig and terrifying. Death is gross, but not grossartig, and is it ever terrifying. The similarities of the two compositions and the differences deserve more reflection than I am able to do here. The parallels are in the compositions. In both a reclining woman is at the center and an upright figure in the foreground blocking*

off the full view of birth and death (both are mysteries not fully comprehensible). Birth takes place in a jumbled world, but it is not chaotic. Death, however, is in our world, but it is there as an alien. It makes chaos out of cosmos. The figures in the top half of the painting are upside down and when you tilt your head to see them, they are not human at all, not God-reflectors. They are therefore not life-bestowing nor value-bestowing.

Death is an invasion into the human world, despite its biochemical regularity and orderliness. The death of the human being is a contradiction in terms. Of course, it never fails to occur, but it ought not to be. If death must nevertheless be, then for images of God, another word, an epilogue, is called for. The Biblical word for that is resurrection, a chapter of the story that comes after the otherwise last chapter. Beckmann's did several Resurrections depicting the last day. But they are murky to me, and possibly also to him, since the largest Resurrection Day he ever did stayed unfinished until the day he died.

Did he ever do a resurrection of Jesus? I've not been able to find one. If he had, what might he have done with a "restored" image of God – Jesus himself post mortem? In the Christian story the role of Jesus is not that he was death-proof (see Beckmann's very dead Jesus in "The Deposition from the Cross"), but that at some specifiable point in human history the inexorable power of death was itself defeated. In Jesus, the Christian story claims, death's last word was broken open with a human being as the pioneer opening for other images of God a hole in the tomb, a light at the end of death's tunnel.

## **Conclusion.**

I was told by James Burke, our St. Louis Art Museum Director,

*that shortly after the end of the Second World War, Morton May, St. Louis patron and collector of Beckmann's work, was in New York on business. In a bit of free time he dropped in at the Curt Valentin Gallery, which was showing recently-acquired Beckmann works from Europe. May was smitten, so the story goes, by the entire collection. When asked what it was that so fascinated him with Beckmann paintings, he said: "I understood every one of them." No one knows what Mr. May really meant, but he could have meant: "Those works are about us. They hold before us the mirror of ourselves."*

*To understand them is thus not difficult, but it may well take courage. The Art Museum's retrospective is works by Beckmann; the show is about us.*

*Edward H. Schroeder  
St. Louis, MO 9/13/84*

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# **The Current Brouhaha About Intelligent Design**

Colleagues,

Some thoughts.

## **1. Evolution or Devolution?**

In this week's St. Louis Post-Dispatch, local columnist Bill McClellan—beloved whimsical homespun philosopher—made a pitch for "devolution" in the current hassle about evolution. Things do indeed change, but if evolution

suggests improvement, things are really NOT getting better. Bill made that perfectly clear—at least for those of us who cherish his kind of clarity. Half a millennium ago Philip Melanchthon agreed. Since Eden things have been going downhill. By the 16th century there was no evidence that the decline was abating. No surprise, he said, since Eden in Genesis 3, it's a fractured world. Sherds do not re-assemble.

## 2. "Intelligent" and its opposite.

Much of the public media coverage we see and hear these days about "evolution vs. intelligent design" [hereafter EV and ID] regularly presents the brouhaha as a hassle between "intelligent" scientists vs. "less-intelligent" religionists, sometimes called creationists. Strange that the less-intelligent have been granted ownership to the intelligent term with their ID mantra, and the EV promoters do not seek to retrieve it. I wonder why. I think I know. In the ID label the word "intelligent" subtly or not so subtly seems to come with a capital "I." Both sides sense that, although the ID folks regularly claim that the capital I is not the point of their proposal. But whether explicit or implicit a capital I means deity. Some, but not all, EV-folks see deity talk as out of bounds, not only in science subjects, but anywhere at all, because for them it is fiction even within its own boundaries. And because "deity" talk is itself such a conflicted term among the religionists, you could never get to the proposed clarity and rationality of science if god-talk got into the mix. For the first question would be: WHOSE god-talk? Not just Muslim or Hindu or Jewish or Christian or Wiccan or whatever. But among each of those major genres, which denomination in that world religion would qualify? Their name is legion.

Back to the term "intelligent." Seems to me that both



sides clearly claim the term. The EV folks are patently making an “intelligent” claim. Even a claim about “design” – “an underlying scheme that governs functioning, developing, or unfolding” [Webster]. If so, the debate is actually between two forms of ID. Even though only one side in the debate is granted ownership of the ID label, the EV protagonists offer their own brand of “intelligent design.” What else is the Darwinian proposal for “the origin of species” and the “descent of man”—just to use the titles of Darwin’s own pioneering books—but that? He was patently proposing “an underlying scheme that governs the functioning, developing and unfolding” of life on our planet. And it was an “intelligent” design. It made sense of the data. None of those following in his train have claimed anything less.

### 3. Psalm 139: 14 [KJV]

“I will praise thee; for I am fearfully and wonderfully made: marvellous are thy works; and that my soul knoweth right well.” Is that holy hoopla for intelligent design? Surely, but with a twist. I purposely cited the old KJV translation for the sake of the “marvel” in the word marvellous. That puts a twist, a nuance, on the term intelligent. The psalmist’s “Aha!” does not celebrate that it all makes sense—“intellegere” in Latin, to understand—that all my human parts do fit together according to an “underlying scheme.” He goes ballistic beyond that—to a point that doesn’t make sense, that exceeds intellegere. He “ marvels.” It’s more than intellegere, it’s mirabilis. Mind-blowing, we say today. Even when you can “intellegere” the “design” (how it works, how it all fits together), the fact that such a design, such a marvel-inducing design even exists, is mind-blowing! And finally all the more when the design-

marvel is me! C'est moi! Years ago I came upon a small German devotional book with quotes from Luther about creation. Its title was "Alles ist Wunder." That's not "everything is a miracle," although Luther could also say that. But better is that everything in creation is a "marvel." At least in our day "miracle" signals something inexplicable. "Marvel" comes even when things are explained, and we still "wonder," why did this happen at all? Thus Luther can be smitten by something as common as an egg. How does it get formed in the mother bird? How can a bird fabricate stone? And over and over again as a daily routine in a domesticated chicken? Such a "marvelously" symmetrically-shaped stone from the body of a bird—and then just a thin shell? How are the egg's insides held in place while the shell is being formed around it? And then once the egg is laid, what is the incubation engineering of setting-mama and chick growing inside the egg?

Even for scientific folks who can now "intellegere" the processes (which Luther didn't know), it is still a "mirabilis." Why does it happen at all?

The psalmist has to say something to somebody about his own "marvelous design." Just saying "wow!" is understatement. "I will praise thee," he exclaims, and then continues for the rest of Psalm 139 with an I-thou canticle.

The Christian angle in today's EV-ID debate is doxology. Can you do Darwin and doxology? Not to "explain" everything, but to respond to the marvel, and finally the marvel-source, that we encounter in our own personal piece of the world we are—and the world around us?

#### 4. God the creator: Source or Cause?

Seems to me that there's a glitch when Christians let the debate center on "natural causes" vs. "God as cause." The Biblical terms in both OT and NT—so the professional scholars tell me—for creator/creation are misfocused when God is viewed as "cause" of all that exists. "Source, author, origin" are better metaphors for what the Bible is talking about when it speaks of God the creator. The very fact that the major action in Genesis 1 is God "speaking" signals a reality beyond cause/effect sequences. We may not be able to comprehend things apart from cause/effect sequencing (so said Kant), but that signals our limitations. After all we exist on the "pot" side from the master potter—to use another Biblical image. How the potter actually "authors" those pots is on his side of the process—even when you learn a lot about the clay. Most likely we'll never know. And do we need to know?"Fearfully and wonderfully made" points to another kind of response to the mystery. Call it doxology. That is the proper, the fitting, response, says the psalmist. Is there any substantive reason why EV rules out that response? I can't think of any. EV is a design for "intellegere." It surely doesn't reduce the "mirabilis." EV is marvel too. Mind-blowing insofar as I have even a glimpse of it.

#### 5. Luther and Darwin. Gulp!

Is Luther's creation-theology challenged by "the origin of species" or the "descent of man"? I don't think so. Here's why. Let's check his proposal in the Small Catechism on the First Article of the Apostles' Creed. Below is the text as I memorized it in catechesis at Immanuel Lutheran parochial school (Rock Island, Illinois)—in the late 1930s! THE FIRST ARTICLE: CREATION

I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth.

What does this mean?

I believe that God has made me linked together with all creatures; that He has given me my body and soul, eyes, ears, and all my members, my reason and all my senses, and still preserves them;

also clothing and shoes, meat and drink, house and home, wife and children, fields, cattle, and all my goods; that He richly and daily provides me with all that I need to support this body and life; that He defends me against all danger, and guards and protects me from all evil;

and all this purely out of fatherly, divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness in me; for all which it is my duty to thank and praise, to serve and obey Him. This is most certainly true.

Note what Luther is and is not saying:

- A. No reference at all to the Genesis creation story. "Believing" in creation is a "Creator and me" agenda, not what I believe about Genesis 1-3. It's what I say and do about myself as creature connected to the Source, Author, Originator. Does "the origin of species" and the "descent of man" connect with this agenda? I don't think so. Twelve times in these few lines it's about "I, me, my."
- B. The parallel verb to "created me" is "given me." Creaturely existence is gifted existence. My life is something bestowed, donated. God's biggest gift to me is me, my own existence. Gifted existence is dependent existence.
- C. Another one of Luther's bons mots about creation was "Alles ist Gabe." Everything's a gift. So look at the list of the gifts he recites in these few lines:

biological, mental, economic, familial, social, protective, preserving.

- D. The last two signal that creaturely existence is conflictive. There's danger and evil. Life is difficult. Sustenance in the face of opponents is included in the gift package.
- E. It's all gratis. Freebees! No merit on the part of the receiver to deserve these goodies, to exist at all. Alles ist Gabe from the Source. And that source is personal, parental. A divine fatherly benefactor.
- F. Comes now the kicker: obligation. "For all which it is my duty to thank and praise, to serve and obey Him. This is most certainly true." The German term translated "duty" here is "schuldig," a much more drastic term. Something like: "For all which I am already way behind in my obligations to thank and to praise, serve and obey." The gifts of creation—all of them gratis—are gifts that obligate. And who of us is "paid up in full" in our personal creation account? Luther makes this "most certainly true" conclusion perfectly clear in his Large Catechism.

"Much could be said if we were to describe in detail how few people believe this article. We all pass over it, hear it, and recite it, but we neither see nor consider what the words enjoin on us. For if we believed it with our whole heart, we would also act accordingly and not swagger about and brag and boast as if we had life, riches, power, honor, and such things of ourselves, as if we ourselves were to be feared and served. This is the way the wretched, perverse world acts, drowned in its blindness, misusing all the blessings and gifts of God solely for its own pride and greed, pleasure and enjoyment, and never once turning to God to thank him or acknowledge him as Lord and Creator. Therefore this article would humble and

terrify us all [talk about terrorism!] if we believed it. For we sin daily with eyes and ears, hands, body and soul, money and property, and with all that we have. . . . Yet Christians have this advantage, that they acknowledge themselves 'schuldig' to serve and obey God for all these things."

#### 6. Segue to St. Paul

Twice in this Luther citation came the word "acknowledge." St. Paul uses the same term in his theology of personal creation in the opening paragraphs of Romans. The non-Jewish world, he says, did get signals from their own creaturely existence about the Source, Author, Originator of their lives. Punning—also in Greek—he says: "knowledge" (gnosis) of the creator they did have, but they did not "acknowledge" (no epignosis) the one they knew. Sounds like "schuldig" all over again. And therefore Paul addresses them with words the "schuldig" need to hear: "Do you not realize that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?"

#### 7. Defective doxology

Defective doxology is the real "problem" in Christian creation theology. Not with the theology, but with us creatures. Needed is some "better news" than the wall-to-wall good news of creaturely gifted existence. For that giftedness obligates—and we are always in arrears with our obligations. Even worse, it's a catch-22. We can never use tomorrow to make up yesterday's shortfall, since all of tomorrow is needed to do tomorrow's thanks and praise, serving and obeying. Needed is some Gift that doesn't obligate. Even better, a Gift that liberates from the never-to-be-fulfilled obligations of being simultaneously creature and sinner. Needed is the Christ of the creed's second article, who does all of the above. And that is how

Luther “explains” the second article—God’s non-obligating gift who liberates from the dead end of our defective doxology. Result? “That I may be his own, live under him in his regime and serve him in everlasting righteousness, innocence and blessedness, in the same way as he is risen from the dead, lives and reigns to all eternity. This is most certainly true.” The truth of this Good News trumps the truth of defective doxology. No wonder the NT calls it a “new” creation.

#### 8. Defective hearing.

Beneath defective doxology lies defective hearing. Paul’s analysis in Romans points to a lethal hearing defect. Though they heard the creator’s voice in their own creaturely lives, he says, they didn’t “acknowledge” him with a response appropriate to the message. They didn’t hear any call to repentance, and the consequence was their own destruction. But at least they heard the voice even if they garbled the message. The bane of many of us moderns is not hearing any voice at all calling over to us from creation—even though our microscopes and telescopes have expanded our actual “seeing” of the “mirabilis” to mind-blowing dimensions. “The heavens declare the glory of God,” says the psalmist. And many of us moderns—not only today’s disbelieving Darwinists—say “Huh? I didn’t hear any message. Surely not a call to repentance.” Such deafness to “hearing” the creator’s voice, better said, hearing the creator’s call, is devolution. Who has the hearing problem—the ones who “hear” such voices or the ones who don’t? If the fittest survive, which of these has the fittest ears for survival? Especially for what is needed in today’s frazzled world for anyone to survive?

#### 9. Survival of the fittest, a footnote.

In the theology of the second article of the creed, the theology of the cross, it is the unfit who survive. Note

who are the survivors in the company Jesus kept: lepers, blind, lame, etc. all of the creature-defectives, all of them doubtless doxological defectives too. In theologies of glory the fittest—most righteous, most powerful, most worthy and wise—survive. What sort of ID is this? How might this theology of “new” creation get into the conversation between EV and ID. That would be a uniquely “Christian” contribution. Here too it doubtless all starts with Paul’s word to the knowledge-crowd in Romans: Repentance.

Peace & joy!  
Ed Schroeder

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## Gospel Blazes in the Dark

Colleagues,

I told them not to do it, but they wouldn’t listen. So Sunday last, November 6, the actual date of my 75th birthday, the Crossings folks confected a celebration. It started with a 3 p.m. “Festival Eucharist,” so they called it, at our home congregation, Bethel Lutheran here in St. Louis. Up front were my ELCA bishop Jerry Mansholt presiding, Fred Niedner – Valparaiso University theology department chair, and one of the gospeliest proclaimers around these days – in the pulpit. For evidence of that “gospeliest” adjective see the ThTh posting of just one year ago, Fred’s sermon at David Truemper’s funeral, <https://crossings.org/thursday/Thur110404.htm>. There was even a new hymn (from Jerry Burce) cum new music (by David Gooding) for the occasion. In addition, special musical treats from Stephen Mager, Robert and Joan Bergt, Robert



Souza, and the Bethel Chancel Choir. Niedner began his homily noting that the day was All Saints in our Lutheran calendar and the lessons plus the music in our liturgy might signal something funereal. As did his sermon title: Buried, Blessed and Edified. He was not going to deny that, so he started with the "buried," and proceeded to do his own "gospel-blazing" through all three passive participles—bury-ed, bless-ed, ed-ify-ed. The Crossings folks most likely have some plans for making Fred's sermon available, but I don't know the specs about that yet.

After the liturgy there came some less holy hoopla including a fresh-flowers-decorated art-nouveau cake with 75 tapers (product of cuisine-artist sister-in-law Linda Schroeder), verbal and posted kudos and finally a Festschrift presentation [=German tradition for aging profs, a volume of essays by colleagues for the occasion]. Eighteen writers contributed to the tome. Its title is the opening line of Burce's hymn: "Gospel Blazes in the Dark." If interested, consult the Crossings office <info@crossings.org>

You dear readers probably don't need to be told that EHS is not usually speechless. But this time it came close. I did mumble something at the end, but it was not epic. And I'm still working on ingesting—and enjoying—it all.

For today's posting, I'll pass on the text of Jerry Burce's hymn. Any commentary would be gilding the lily. Sorry I can't (don't know how) to pass on to you David Gooding's marvelous music. Maybe there's some way and someone will tell me.

Peace & joy!

Ed Schroeder

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## ***Gospel Blazes in the Dark: A Poem***

***By Jerome E. Burce***

*Composed for a celebration of Edward H. Schroeder's 75th birthday, and, omitting stanza 2a, for such further use thereafter as any may wish to make of it.*

*1. Gospel blazes in the dark  
Flinty words supply the spark  
Splendid teachers fan the flame  
Of sudden hope in Jesus' name  
For genuine salvation.*

*2. Thus are servants, called by God,  
Sent with feet adorned and shod  
With the winsome news of peace  
In Christ who makes the warfare cease  
That we 'gainst God keep waging.*

*2a. Note our joy, dear God, we pray  
Take the thanks we sing today  
For your gift of fiery Ed  
By whom our bleary hearts were led  
To see the Light astounding.*

*3. Holy Spirit ever praised,  
By your lively breath be raised  
Saints to bless each time and place  
With lavish talk of honest grace  
And deeds of Godly kindness.*

*4. Grant that all who dare to preach  
Seeking glory grasp and reach  
For the nettle, piercing cross,*

*That all but Christ they scorn as loss  
Him crucified their treasure.*

*5. Let them rightly parse your Word  
Law and Gospel clearly heard  
Fools to beggar, slaves to free  
From Adam's grim insanity  
That we, divine, must save us.*

*6. God for us when all is lost  
Mercy eating sin's deep cost  
This your glory saints adore  
For this creation's praise will soar  
From age to age unending.*

*7. Christ the end of holy wrath  
Christ for all the future's path,  
Fuel your church, excite the spark,  
That Gospel blazing in the dark  
Will fill the world with gladness.*

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# **Luther as Mission Theologian – 9.5 Theses**

Edward H. Schroeder

[Presentation at the Forum of Lutheran Clergy of Metro St.  
Louis, University Club Tower, Brentwood, MO, October 31, 2005]

# Preface: Luther's Reformation Aha!

1. Luther's 95 theses #1 signals his mission theology: "When our Lord and Master, Jesus Christ, said 'Repent' (Matt. 4:17), He called for the entire life of believers to be one of penitence."

"Mission field" is not a geographical term, but a cardiological one. The "field" is the human heart. The change signalled in the word "repent" is a change (ala Luther) in "what one's heart is hanging onto." Either in fear, or in love, or in trust—or some combination of all three "verbs of the heart." WHAT your heart is hanging on was thereby Luther's definition for a deity. And the question then was "which god?" True god or false god? Mission and repentance in Christian vocabulary signal changes in the de facto deity (and their name is legion) at the heart of the matter.

The goal of mission, what Jesus is calling for in Matt. 4, is expressed by St. Paul in the 2nd lectionary lesson for two weeks ago (Oct. 16) as he reviews the mission history of the Thessalonian congregation: "how you turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God and ... his Son ... Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath that is coming." I Thess. 1:1-10. The goal of Christian mission is finally to have people change gods, to switch where their heart is hanging.

2. That can also be true of folks who call themselves Christian. They too may—better said, regularly do—need a god-change. It all depends on what their hearts are REALLY hanging onto. If repentance is to be a daily event, then daily god-change is also in the mix—not primarily in the head, but in the heart where fears, loves, and trusts transpire. Here is where "true" fear, love, trust is constantly conflicted by "other gospels" knocking on the door.

3. At the end of his explanation to the Apostles Creed in the Large Catechism Luther says: "These articles of the Creed, therefore, divide and distinguish us Christians from all other people on earth. All who are outside the Christian church [ausser der Christenheit], whether heathen, Turks, Jews, or false Christians and hypocrites, even though they believe in and worship only the one, true God, nevertheless do not know what his attitude is toward them. They cannot be confident of his love and blessing. They remain in eternal wrath and damnation, for they do not have the Lord Christ, and, besides, they are not illuminated and blessed by the gifts of the Holy Spirit."

Taking his cue from Romans 1 and Acts 17 Luther clarifies what he understands about the switch that repentance/mission entails. He understands that God-encounters, yes, encounters with the one and only God there is, happen to everyone throughout history, and that "believing" and "worshiping" response regularly ensues. However, folks never perceive "from nature" the attitude of the "one true God" to be merciful to sinners. The universal drive throughout world religions to rectify things with the deity by sacrifices corroborates that this is not known. Even to his fellow God-believing Jews Jesus has to say: God "desires mercy, not sacrifice." That is: "I, God, desire to be merciful to you, rather than you sacrificing to me" in order to patch things up between us.

What "heathen, Turks, Jews, or false Christians and hypocrites" are missing, even with their theisms, is that "they do not have the Lord Christ." Note the word "have." It's a possession thing. And when you don't have Christ (who is "had" by trusting him) you lack being "confident of God's love and blessing. . .[and] are not illuminated and blessed by the gifts of the Holy Spirit." You do, sadly, continue to "have" something else: "They remain in eternal wrath and damnation." To modern ears that sounds way too harsh. Definitely not nice. Yet it is no harsher

than Paul's words to the Thessalonians above who now "have" Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath that is coming."

4. The kind of salvation offered in the Christian Gospel is different from the salvation offered by other gospels.

As S. Mark Heim has shown, differing world religions offer different salvations. "Going to heaven" is not a universal salvation offer. In fact, going to heaven is more central to the salvation offered in Islam, than the salvation offered in the Christian gospel. Buddhist Nirvana and the Kingdom of God offered by Christ do not overlap at all. And the Good news of the crucified Messiah is not focused on going to heaven either. It offers survival from divine criticism, that God's last word for Christ-trusters is (and will forever be) mercy. And who knows what those "mansions" really look like? New Testament writers tell us very little. Might well be that they weren't all that interested. Already having God's last word about their upbeat futures, the architecture of eternity was no big deal.

5. God operates a "double mission" in the world, not just "one" Missio Dei as now permeates ecumenical mission theology--also in the LCMS and the ELCA.

Luther's thesis #62, "The true treasure of the church is the most holy Gospel of the glory and grace of God," designates the Christic one of these two missions. But God's other "mission" in Moses still persists for those not yet covered by Christ's mission. If you think they are mostly the same--as Missio Dei theology tends to do--then read 2. Corinthians 3:4ff. Here Paul talks about God's old covenant and new covenant, God's old ministry and new ministry, God's two missions to the same mission field, "the tablet of human hearts," One mission kills, one makes alive. St. Paul's own Christian mission, so he claims, celebrates God's "regime change" with sinners. It is the move,

first of all on God's part, from Moses to Christ, from a mission of condemnation to a mission of justification, from a lethal (though fading) glory to a permanent glory that outshines the other one to the nth degree. Christian mission aims to move people out from under lethal glory into "the glory and grace of God, that treasure of the most holy Gospel."

6. One of Luther's favored images for mission is the Gospel coming into new territory as a "Platzregen," a thundershower, a cloudburst.

That can be both good news and bad. God sends the Gospel shower as a surprise, not expected, but much needed. That's good news. But if nothing grows in the soil where this rain falls, or if later the Gospel's nurture is ignored or spurned, God moves the Platzregen somewhere else. Then a "famine of the Word of God" (the grim word of the prophet Amos) moves in and parched earth is all that's left. Bad news indeed. Does this shed light on the apparent "move" of the Christian Gospel to the earth's southern hemisphere away from the churchly north where it has been moistening for two millennia?

7. If you're baptized, you're a missionary.

That's the self-understood mission theology of Christians in the Ethiopian Evangelical Church – Mekane Yesus. According to the Lutheran World Federation the EECMY is the fastest growing Lutheran church in the world today. In a recent survey of new members only 8% became Christ-followers through contact with a pastor. The rest heard the Good News over the backyard fence from their neighbors. "Everybody knows" that if you're baptized you're a missionary. The key verb is "offer." Anyone who has received the offer can make the offer.

8. Reformation Day's three lectionary texts spell out a sequence: Central terms—Forgiveness (God's NEW offer in Jeremiah

31), Faith in that offer (Romans 3), Freedom the result (John 8).

Christ's forgiveness is offered (with reference, if need be, to previous offers where people's hearts have been hanging). Recipients are "encouraged" to shift their faith to the forgiveness offered. The upshot is freedom, freedom from the slavery (as Jesus tells his Jewish hearers) that their prior heart-hanging had not remedied. The freedom in Christ's offer is "total freedom," whatever that all means. One might say that John's entire Gospel spells out the specs.

9. USA is as much a mission field as was the Holy Roman Empire of Luther's day, where everybody (except Jews) was baptized.

But where hearts were hanging in his day was another matter. And the penance/indulgences gospel of the day was an "other" Gospel. Hearts needed to switch to the church's true treasure. That's mission. Today's alternate gospels—churchly & secular—are legion. That is as true in the USA today as anywhere else in the world. These alternate gospels are being feared, loved and trusted all over the place. Also among folks who want to be Christians. Hearts need to switch lest God's Mosaic mission have the last word.

9.5. The theology of mission is the theology of the cross. The final 4 theses of the 95.

#92. "Away, then with those prophets [the indulgence hustlers in ML's day, the false gospellers—churchly & secular—in our day] who say to Christ's people, 'Peace, peace,' where there is no peace."

#93. "Hail, hail to all those prophets who say to Christ's people, 'The cross, the cross,' where [in the plethora of other gospels] there is no cross."



#94. “Christians should be exhorted to be zealous to follow Christ, their Head, through penalties, deaths, and hells;”

#95. “And let them thus be more conFIDEnt [note the word “fide,” faith, in this term, also in Luther’s Latin] of entering heaven through many tribulations rather than through a false assurance [securitas] of peace.”

Edward H. Schroeder

[LutherasMissionTheologian \(PDF\)](#)

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## **Luther’s 95 Theses—What Was That all About?**

Colleagues,

Four days hence is Reformation Day in the Lutheran Church calendar. For other Christians, who don’t see Luther’s debate proposal of October 31, 1517 as quite that important, it’s still the Eve of All Saints Day (Nov. 1). And for the secular culture of America it’s Halloween [the “E’en”—equals evening—before “All Hallows (old English for “saints”) Day,” the day to commemorate all the dear departed Christ-confessors]—with nary a clue of what Luther was fussing about, nor of any commemoration of the blessed dead. In the Roman Catholic tradition there is also Nov. 2, “All Souls Day,” the day to commemorate, and thereby assist, the dear departed who are yet in purgatory. Although All Saints Day did carry over into some Lutheran churches, All Souls Day—no surprise—didn’t make it.

What was the fuss about that triggered Luther's 95 theses? He titled them: Disputation on the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences. First a word about disputations. These structured and juried public debates were the bread and butter of academic life in the European university. "Tenured" professors proposed the topics—current hot potato issues or classic topics—specified the time and place and invited folks to come and join the conversation. Demonstrating your ability in such a disputation also served as the "final exam" for grad students aspiring to a degree.

So what were indulgences? They were the last step of the 4-part sequence in the process of penance, one of the seven churchly actions called sacraments. The sacrament of penance, also designated confession and absolution, was the week-in-week-out access to God's grace for the faithful. Five of the sacraments were by their very nature one-time and one-time-only events—baptism, confirmation, marriage (or its celibate alternative, monastic life or the priesthood), and last rites. Eucharist (the Lord's Supper) and penance were the two repeaters throughout one's life, often linked, with penance as the required prelude to receiving Holy Communion. As Western medieval eucharistic theology evolved, making the eucharist beneficial for believers simply by having a priest do it, whether or not a congregation was present, penance became the one "routine" sacrament in common folk piety.

Whether you "went to confession" was the equivalent in popular piety in Luther's day to today's "going to church" as the trademark of being a serious Christian.

So penance was important. Centrally so. In Luther's time, how did it work? Four steps.

1. Contritio cordis—heartfelt contrition

2. Confessio oralis—oral (out loud) confession to a priest, the only one authorized to do the next number.
3. Absolutio sacerdotalis—absolution (=word of forgiveness) spoken by a priest
4. Satisfactio operis—a work of satisfaction to re-balance the account that the confessed sin had skewed.

Indulgences—not yet mentioned above—entered as an alternative to step 4. The practice (and theology to back it up) arose as an alternate form of #4, action to restore the equilibrium that one's sin had unbalanced. The medium was money. In place of “doing something” costly to “make things even” (the literal meaning of satis-faction), depleting one's coin-purse (also costly) was a valid equivalent. Especially in north European lands, folk culture had a sense of money as a surrogate for settling blood-feuds. If it could balance accounts between warring clans, why not also with God? It made sense.

And by Luther's time much of the focus for the faithful to confess and pay was to benefit those “all souls” still being purged in purgatory, close family members first of all.

Where money's involved, corruption is near at hand—also in the church. Not only in the piety of the peasants [Hey, you can buy forgiveness!], but also in the church's upper echelons among the higher primates. You can create your own list of possible venues for villainy: fund-raising, pay-offs, lucrative contracts, skimming the till, false advertising, etc. Luther doesn't bypass such fiscal hanky-panky in his 95 theses, but that is not his main concern. It's the piety of the peasants that agitates and aggravates him the most, namely, what this church-wide practice of penance is actually doing to the faith of the faithful. In short, it is un-doing that faith. His core complaint: “Christians are taught to rely on salvation by letters of indulgence . . . [in place of] the grace of God and the

compassion shown in the cross.”

Let’s take a closer look at just a few of Luther’s 95 theses.

**Thesis #1.** “When our Lord and Master, Jesus Christ, said ‘Repent’ [“penitentiam agite, etc.” is Luther’s Latin here, quoting Matthew 4:17 in the Vulgate Bible] He called for the entire life of believers to be one of penitence.”

The Latin itself is capable of two meanings: “repent” or “do (the sacrament of) penance.” Luther opts for the first, if for no other reason than that in Jesus’ time there was no such thing as the 4-step practice of the sacrament of penance with its indulgence add-on as 4B. In Luther’s own commentary to his theses he not only scores this misreading of the Biblical text, but moves toward the fundamental rhythm of faith lived out. Not weekly journeys to the parish confessional booth, but “entire life” stuff, daily turning away from where my Adamic yens constantly nudge me to Christ-focused living in the contexts of my daily relationships and callings.

A penance sacrament sequence that ends with indulgences, no matter how regularly practiced, will never get you there. It is not Gospel-grounded, but instead grounded in the rubrics of the law—paying off or paying back the debt that sin has incurred, even after I’ve heard God’s word of forgiveness from the priest. Indulgences make payment the last word—even if it’s done with a gratitude attitude. The last word is the one we had two Sundays ago in the Gospel for the day. It was the “render to Caesar” pericope, but the “render” word softens what the Greek actually says. The actual word there is “pay back”—both to Caesar and to God—“pay back what you owe.” That is not Good News. Jesus (Matthew 18:21-35ff.—the appointed Gospel a few weeks ago) shows that “pay back” and “forgiveness” are clean contraries. Peter tries to merge them, but Jesus makes it perfectly clear that a

forgiveness procedure that ends in pay-back is no forgiveness at all. And woe to the one who tries to make it so.

### **Theses #60 and 62.**

“We do not speak rashly in saying that the treasures of the church are the keys of the church, and are bestowed by the merits of Christ. The true treasure of the church is the most holy [Luther’s word “sacrosanctum’] Gospel of the glory and grace of God.”

The business of “merits” permeates the indulgence controversy. Yes, says Luther, of course, Christ abounds in “merits.” His life, suffering, death and resurrection do not add up to nothing. They are a huge treasure. But these merits, these “goodies,” are offered gratis, on the house, to the penitent sinner. Christ says: “Repent and believe the Gospel” = turn away from whatever else your heart is hanging on and hang on to these goodies I offer you. Absolute freebees.

The sacrament of penance had not bypassed the merits of Christ. Not at all. But the medieval theology had cornered these merits (together with the extra merits of sacrosanctum saints) and banked them into the church’s own treasury. To be sure, they were for distribution to sinners needing them. But the distribution system had been legalized. To get the goodies you had to do something—even if it was as modest as “doing the best you could.” Luther said that was making a “merx” (merchandise) out of Christ’s merits—to say nothing of trivializing them by linking them to the extra merits (Ha!) of the super-saints. When Christ’s merits become a commodity for merchandising, his authentic forgiveness of sinners goes out the window. The church’s “keys” are not the keys to the vault to regulate distribution to the deserving, but the authorization, the mandate, to be as extravagant in passing out Christ’s forgiveness to the undeserving, as he himself was when he

initiated the process.

The church's treasure, the keys, the merits of Christ, says thesis #60, are all one ball of wax. And thesis #62 says that whole ball of wax—treasure, keys, Christ—is God's "grace," God's give-away program—the very opposite of pay-back programs. "Grace" was one of the central conflict-terms in the Reformation controversy. Luther's claim was that—at least according to the Biblical use of the term—God's grace was "favor dei." Surprise, surprise, in Christ God is favorable to sinners. Christ-connected sinners even "please" him. He likes them. Nothing there about a sinner's initiative (even just a smidgin) or grace-transfers that follow such initiatives.

The scholastic theology behind indulgence practice was itself a "grace alone" procedure, but it was less charitable about grace. Not a freebee. Yes, God was indeed gracious—by definition. And that grace was indeed therapeutic for healing sin's sickness. But it too was seen as a commodity, "merx," not a relational reality of God being merciful to me a sinner. Grace was "stuff" from God (good stuff, to be sure, healing stuff) for transfer. But something in the receiver had to trigger its dispersal. Indulgences, part 4B of the sacrament of penance, was one guaranteed way to trigger the transaction. The merits of Christ (and the saints)—very precious and good stuff—flowed from the church's treasury when indulgences transpired. It was an approved alternative to the original step #4, doing the good work of satisfaction yourself. With cash you can tap into the huge reservoir of extra grace-goodies (aka merits) piled up by Christ and the saints. The goods in the treasury were transferable. The church held the keys. Indulgences turned the key to open the lock. It made perfect sense.

But not if grace and the church's treasure were something else.

And, says thesis #62, indeed they are. God's grace is the very glory of God. The fundamental "glow-ry" of God (as Bob Bertram liked to pun) is the glow of God's spectacular give-away program, centered in God's "giving" his Son for sinners, so that they might have the life that lasts. "Relying on salvation by letters of indulgence" is clean contrary to "the grace of God and the compassion shown in the cross."

Now we cut to the chase, the final theses of the 95.

Luther is convinced in 1517 (thesis #89) that the pope is basically a good guy, that the pope's "theology of indulgences" is what Luther is proposing. It is only the henchmen/hustlers out in the provinces who have undermined "the salvation of souls" with their huckstering. But because this "exposed the church and the pope to the ridicule of their enemies," the pope himself must take corrective action. For he is the pastor of all and "these questions are serious matters of conscience to the laity."

Confident that the pope is on the right side, Luther says (#91): "If, therefore, indulgences were preached in accordance with the spirit and mind of the pope, all these difficulties would be easily overcome, and, indeed, cease to exist." And that propels Luther to his hortatory grand appeal, his final four.

**#92.** "Away, then with those prophets [the indulgence hustlers] who say to Christ's people, 'Peace, peace,' where there is no peace."

**#93.** "Hail, hail to all those prophets who say to Christ's people, 'The cross, the cross,' where [in these other prophets] there is no cross."

**#94.** "Christians should be exhorted to be zealous to follow Christ, their Head, through penalties, deaths, and hells;"

**#95.** “And let them thus be more confident [note the word “fide,” faith, in this term, also in Luther’s Latin] of entering heaven through many tribulations rather than through a false assurance [securitas] of peace.”

Penance, repentance, is a salvation agenda. Therefore “the cross (both Christ’s and our own). . . following Christ as head of the body . . . faith’s confidence instead of self-fabricated securities,” that’s what it’s all about. The cross, the cross. Penance with the indulgence add-on seeks to escape suffering. It only “hurts” the pocketbook, diminishes our net worth, but does not crucify the flesh. And in not doing that, it gives false security. It leaves the penitent in the spiderweb of performance and reward. Even worse, it encourages him to persist in playing that game, which never leads to the repentance Jesus was calling for. Consequently it never brings the penitent to the “gospel of the glory and grace of God.”

It’s all the theology of the cross. Thus it should come as no surprise when 6 months later (April 1518) Luther shows up at the Augustinian monks’ annual meeting in Heidelberg to inform the rest of his monastic order “what’s going on over there in Wittenberg.” “It’s all theology of the cross,” he says. “The churchly establishment is stuck on theology of glory. That theology calls the bad good and the good bad. Theologians of the cross say it like it is.”

Contemporary relevance for church life today.

1. When they start talking about money, listen hard to hear if it’s still “the cross, the cross”—Christ’s and your own—that they’re talking about. If not, walk away. In most all of church history it’s been a dis-connect between the two.
2. If the pitch is what benefit you’ll get from following



their lead, check to see if that benefit includes crucifying the old Adam/old Eve besetting us all. Escaping life's ouches is a constant alternate gospel to "following Christ, the Head, through penalties, deaths, and hells."

3. Prosperity evangelism surely can't pass this test, no matter how often and how badly they mangle Christ's words about "having life abundantly." There is zero-correlation between what Christ was talking about and "having all the stuff you've wanted." In fact, it's the opposite: the "securitas" of having it all equals having NONE of what Christ offers.
4. America's yearning for "securitas" and taking global and lethal measures to insure it is indulgence theology written in the billions. It is the opposite of the "fide" that is at the center of the confidence of thesis #95. It will not get our nation out of our own purgatory. So it's no surprise when national prophets "call good bad, and bad good." But it's doomed to failure—[as we are already seeing?] God's purgative is something else, it's Luther's thesis #1. That says it like it is.
5. Note who Luther names as the agents for putting rightful penitential faith and its theological warrant out in the marketplace (#93). Prophets, he calls them. That doesn't mean predictors. Nor is it restricted to clergy. It designates someone with access to some public some place. And who of us doesn't? Even if it's only "two or three gathered." But remember, the opening line of the prophet is not: "Here's what I think." Instead it's the "confidence"—and the chutzpah—to say: "Thus says the Lord."

Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder