

God and Continuing Catastrophes

Colleagues,

After Banda Aceh's tsunami and New Orleans' Katrina and Pakistan's earthquake and the unending drumbeat of corpse after corpse in Africa, the Middle East—yes, worldwide—the cry goes up “How long, O Lord, how long?”

Marie and I are reading (out loud) our way through Jeremiah these days. Not much cheer there. Most often the “good news”—there'll be no gloom and doom, just wall-to-wall shalom—comes from the mouth of Jeremiah's adversaries. Of these folks (says Jeremiah) the LORD says “I didn't send them. They are lying prophets. Don't believe them.” [Some twenty times it is “lying” that is God's charge against them. Does that sound relevant for today's theo-politics?] And when it's Jeremiah's turn, over and over again it's the unholy trinity of “famine, pestilence and sword.” And none of that comes by accident or an act of “mother nature.” If you're committed to monotheism, there is finally only One who authors everything—catastrophes too. More than once we hear it in the Scriptures. One example, Deuteronomy 32:39.

Curiously Jeremiah never asks the Why-question of God as the catastrophes unfold. There is a Why-question, of course, but it is asked of his hearers: “Why don't you repent, stop provoking God with your wickedness, stop believing the lying prophets, change your ways, turn away from your idols back to the one true God?”

Brings to mind the first of Luther's 95 theses (whose 488th anniversary is just 11 days away!): “When our Lord and Master,

Jesus Christ, said 'Repent,' He called for the entire life of believers to be one of penitence." Luther goes on to say that this word from Christ is not at all speaking of the church's "sacrament of penance," even though Luther did deem that sacrament valid, and availed himself of it throughout his life.

Christ is here calling for something else, he said, something all-pervasive, a day-in day-out "posture"—first of all in the heart, then in "the outward signs—various mortifications of the flesh" that such a heart produces. "Mortification" sounds rather harsh. Yet it is flesh's mortification that is called for. A dying that's then linked to a rising. The posture of repentance is the posture—in heart and action—of turning away from "my will be done" to "Thy will be done."

Catastrophes—both those that we secularly label from "mother nature," and those abetted by human malfeasance—do indeed raise questions. But the question comes out different depending on our posture. If we posit ourselves in the driver's seat, on the judge's bench, then we ask God to justify himself when catastrophe strikes. It's the classical theodicy question: "God [theo-], are you being just [-dicy]?" But that's only "classic" for Old Adams and Old Eves, the first recorded Biblical folks who sought to put God in the dock to justify the catastrophe that had erupted in Eden.

Biblical theology has a completely different "classic" question for such a time. Biblical "catastrophe-theology" —starting in Genesis 3—puts the question to the humans: "Where are you? What have you done?" Jesus follows in that train when his opponents put the "Old-Adam" theodicy question to him—the man born blind, the tower collapse at Siloam, Pilate's murderous slaughter of innocents. Never once does Jesus answer the "old" question: "How can God be just in this catastrophe?" He turns it around as a divine address to the questioners, a Word from God to them:

“Except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish.” Whether the catastrophe is “natural”—though Biblically there is no such thing—or patently God-engineered as Babylon’s invasion of Judah, the message is the same. “You, not God, must justify yourself before the bench. So, what is your plea?”

The response proposed by Jesus in his first words in Mark’s Gospel for such a time as this is: “Repent and believe the Good News.” That’s the penitential funeral signalled in thesis #1 of Luther’s 95, a dying and rising, mortification and vivification, that leaves the addressee alive after it’s all over.

That prompts these corollary reflections on the “problem of evil.”

1. There is no Biblical “explanation” for the reality of evil—starving children, Columbine murders, tsunami catastrophes—in our experience. How can God let that happen? has no answer in the Bible. Some of the evil in the world can be “explained” as the consequence of human bad actions—environmental decay, the collapse of empires, cancer in chain-smokers, tormented children of abusive parents, etc. But that often just pushes the question back to asking Why did God let these people become that way?
2. The “mystery of wickedness” is Biblical language for the obvious fact of evil in God’s intended “good” world. But there are two ways to inquire about the problem of evil. If you think of the “problem of evil” as the question: “Where did it come from?” then there is no clear Biblical answer for the question. In the Genesis creation story there was a 100% “good” garden with all good creatures, and all of a sudden one of the creatures started acting and speaking contra-God. Where that critter came from (and he is a creature, not a deity) is a mystery. It ought not to have been there, but it was.

3. There is a second way to approach the “problem of evil.” That’s when you see the “problem of evil” as “How can we cope with it and survive?” For that question there is a Biblical answer. Not till the New Testament does it become “perfectly clear.” It is the Crucified and Risen Christ. At the end of the epistle to the Ephesians the apostle counsels for coping with evil. It’s battle language. It calls for the “whole armor of God.” As the individual items of that armor are mentioned, they are all Christic-gospel pieces: truth, righteousness, peace, faith, salvation, the Spirit. Perhaps ringing the changes on the “mystery of wickedness,” he puts them under the rubric of the “mystery of the gospel.”
4. Daily-life God-experience is ambiguous. There is good stuff and bad stuff. Some of it very good, and some very bad. The bad stuff, the very bad, can urge us to the conclusion “God’s responsible for evil.” For clearly there is no mercy and goodness from God to be seen in many life situations. That is what the phrase “Hidden God,” a Biblical term, points to. Luther recurred to that image often. It did not mean that there was no God-evidence on hand in such life-experiences. Rather it meant that the God-evidence on hand was not good news at all. Just the opposite. If the God we meet there—in catastrophes, for example—is indeed the same God, the merciful Father of Jesus Christ, then that God surely is hidden. The only way to cope with Hidden God encounters is to flee to “God revealed in Christ,” and to TRUST this Word from God, and finally NOT TRUST the opposite “word” coming from our encounters with God hidden. It amounts to the confession of Jairus: Lord, I believe, help thou my unbelief.
5. That is why in ancient days folks would hold up a crucifix before the eyes of dying people. It is impossible to deny the negative experience of death —possibly even God-

forsakenness, as in Jesus' own experience— but even in the face of that experience it is possible to “believe, to TRUST,” the word of that same crucified Jesus as God's final Good News word to me. And to trust that this Cross-word will outlive the death-experience. That amounts to trusting that Christ's own Easter will (as he promised) be my eastering. That because he lives, I too will “outlive” my own death.

6. In his dogmatics Werner Elert says this about our own experience of evil:
 - a. Evil regularly approaches me “personally,” i.e., some person (often a “thou” whom I trust) makes the offer, suggestion, that I follow an alternate path from following God. [Lady Macbeth was Elert's example giving “advice” to King Macbeth.]
 - b. That offer regularly finds within me a set of ears for whom that evil offer sounds plausible, possibly even a good thing to do. [Macbeth says: Hmmm, that sounds interesting.]
 - c. Surrounding this one-on-one relationship with an individual person-tempter, however, is the experience that the power of evil on the scene is much bigger than just the human actors. It is a power that far exceeds what these “mere humans” could generate. Evil is not just wily “flesh and blood” fellow humans, but “principalities & powers,” entities of evil of cosmic dimensions.
 - d. There is nowhere on earth that is immune to evil. Thus in our day it has equal access to Pyongyang and to Pennsylvania Avenue.
7. All this is regularly summed up in the Biblical word “devil.” Although that word is singular, the operators are manifold—“rulers of the present darkness...spiritual hosts of wickedness,” etc. There are several job-descriptions in

the Bible for this Power of Evil. In the creation story it is Tempter ("Listen to me, not to God. You'll like it."). The word Devil (diabolos in Greek) means wrecker/destroyer, one who brings chaos into God's orderly cosmos. Satan (Hebrew term) means prosecuting attorney, the accuser. Father of Lies is another (Jesus uses it in John's Gospel), the guru of lying prophets. Prince of this World (power-broker) "managing" people and places in the fallen world where God's own lawful management has been usurped, and Christ's mercy-management has not yet arrived.

8. Christian resource for all such encounters with evil is Christ. Luther's famous hymn "A Mighty Fortress is our God" is all about this. Read or sing it once with this focus. Christian confidence in such encounters comes from Christ whose Cross and Resurrection has (a) discombobulated this Destroyer, (b) prosecuted to death this Prosecutor, (c) exposed the Liar's lies, (d) slapped the Tempter's mouth shut, (e) displaced the Prince of this World to reclaim that world (and all of us in it) as his own—and to bring it and us back to our rightful "owner and creator."
9. And in the face of catastrophes (hurricane Wilma now coming around the corner) the same Good News—the last verse of A Mighty Fortress—fits:

*God's Word (aka Christ) forever shall abide,
No thanks to foes, who fear it,
For God himself fights by our side
With weapons of the Spirit.
If they take our house,
Goods, fame, child or spouse.
Wrench our life away,
They cannot win the day.
The kingdom's ours forever.*

Peace & Joy!
Ed Schroeder

Discipleship and Spirituality According to Luther's Catechisms

Colleagues,

Both Discipleship and Spirituality were hot topics during our time with the Lutherans in Singapore last year. If for no other reason than that these terms had come over from the USA and were front and center in the rhetoric of other Christian congregations in Singapore. And these congregations were growing! So, no surprise, this guest from America was asked to discuss "Lutheran" notions of those two terms. I opted for Luther's catechisms as a point of departure. It came out something like this.

Peace & Joy!
Ed Schroeder

Discipleship and Spirituality According to Luther's Catechisms

I. Introduction Luther intended his Small Catechism to be the handbook to be used in the home for daily Christian

living. Today some Christians call that “Discipleship and Spirituality.” [He also wrote a “Large Catechism” for pastors—both for their own Christian life and for leading Christ’s people in the Christian congregation.] Here are some examples in the catechism: Prayers at morning and evening, prayers at table, Baptism as a daily event, the Lord’s prayer for everyday use, “discipleship” = being “owned” by Christ and serving him, the Third Article of the Apostles Creed as the secret to Christian “spirituality.”

II. Some Background Information for Martin Luther’s Two Catechisms.

1. In the year 1529 Martin Luther wrote two catechisms (German titles: *Kleiner Katechismus*, *Grosser Katechismus*). He did so after a survey was made in congregations in Saxony in the year 1528. In this “Saxon Visitation” seminary professors from Wittenberg (Luther too) went out into the towns and villages to listen & learn what was actually happening in the preaching and teaching in the congregations. What they discovered was “bad news.” Many people in the congregations, & many pastors too, did not know basic Christianity. Luther’s own words in the preface to the Small Catechism: “Good God, what wretchedness I beheld! The common people . . . have no knowledge whatever of Christian teaching, and unfortunately many pastors are quite incompetent.” With his 2 catechisms—small one for laity, large one for clergy—Luther offers help to improve the sad situation.
2. There was a long tradition of catechisms in the Western Latin-speaking church. They usually had three parts: Apostles Creed, Lord’s Prayer, 10 Commandments, and usually the parts came in this

order: Creed first, Lord's Prayer second, Commandments last. Luther changed the order in his catechisms, but—more important—he changed the theology underlying all parts of the catechism. He also added 3 more parts—Baptism, the Lord's Supper, and Private Confession & Absolution. A total of Six Chief Parts.

3. Luther's original discovery, his "breakthrough," as he called it, for reading the Bible, was that God speaks two different "words" in the Bible: God's word of law and God's word of gospel (often called "God's word of promise"). Two words from the same God to the same human beings, but as different as death and life, night and day. Law is God's requirement. Its primary verb is "require." God's law requires that we do (or don't do) this or that. The Gospel is God's gift. Its primary verb is "offer." God offers—as a gift—his mercy and forgiveness. Luther's catechisms apply this distinction between law and gospel in all 6 parts.
4. Previous catechisms used in the Western church did not know that distinction. They taught the Creed, the Lord's Prayer, & the Commandments as revelations of God's will for Christians: what people OUGHT to believe, how they OUGHT to pray, & how they SHOULD behave. Those three Words of God, it seemed, touched the basic areas of a Christian's life—faith, worship, ethics; (or) the mind, the heart, the hand; (or) thinking, feeling, acting.
5. But the language of "should" and of "ought" made the entire catechism to be God's law—things which God required people to do. That is not Good News for sinners, not Gospel.
6. Luther begins both catechisms with the 10

Commandments, not the Creed. But he does not present the 10 Commandments as ethics. Instead the 10 commandments are God's word for diagnosis, God's X-ray, to show us our sin, our sickness. They do tell us what we should do, but they show us that we are NOT doing what we should be doing. They show us that our person (inside), not just our action (outside), needs to be changed. They show us the path we should take in life, but do so to show us that we are already OFF the path and going some other direction.

7. The first commandment, said ML, is really the only commandment there is. "The First Commandment is the chief source and fountainhead from which all the others proceed; again, to it they all return and upon it they depend, so that the end and beginning are all linked and bound together." The other 9 commandments actually "repeat" this first one—we should fear, love and trust in God—in these other areas of our life. But even with all their godliness, the 10 commandments are not good news for sinners. None of us (on the inside) is fearing, loving & trusting God in all areas of our life "with all our heart, all our mind, all our strength" all the time. We're all first-commandment-breakers.
8. In Luther's catechisms Good News does not come until we get to the Apostles Creed. And even there the Gospel's sort of Good News is not present in the Creed's first article. The first article says that God is our creator and that everything we have is a gift from God. That sure sounds good. But these gifts put us under obligations ("oughts") that we can never fulfill. That fact is often

“softened” in some translations of Luther’s words here. For example, what I memorized in my childhood was: “For all of this [all the gifts of creation that God has given me] it is my duty to thank and to praise, to serve and obey God. This is most certainly true.” That suggests that the “duty” is do-able. What Luther’s German actually says is much more drastic: “For all this I am already in arrears, way behind in my obligations, to thank and to praise, to serve and obey God. This is most certainly true!” Even the first article of the Apostles Creed concerning creation leaves us guilty before God.

- 9. Only when we come to the 2nd article of the creed [“I believe in Jesus Christ”] does the Good News begin. In this article the confession is simple: Jesus Christ is my Lord. Lord means owner, Luther says. “My Lord” means the one to whom I belong. The biographical elements in the second article of the creed are the means by which he became “my” Lord and made me his “own.”*
- 10. After the 2nd article of the creed all the remaining parts of the catechism are Good News—the creed’s third article, then the Lord’s Prayer, and then the three items Luther added in his catechism: Baptism, the Lord’s Supper, and Confession and Absolution.*
- 11. The Creed’s third article is the “good news” about God’s work (through Holy Spirit and the church) to connect people today to Jesus Christ as Lord. It tells how sinners today receive the Good News that they too need in order to survive in the face of God’s X-ray report about them.*
- 12. The Lord’s Prayer is Good News for practicing our*

trust in Christ & for receiving God's continual care and blessings in the struggle of daily life, a struggle articulated in the 7 different areas of the 7 petitions of the Lord's Prayer.

- 13. Baptism, Lord's Supper and Confession & Absolution are three resources (means of grace) that God supplies for keeping us connected to Christ in our struggle to live by faith in daily life. In these add-on parts to his catechisms Luther's emphasis is not CORRECT TEACHING about these 3 sacraments, but the best way to USE all 3 for daily life. Here is Luther's gift for discipleship and spirituality.*
- 14. "Using" baptism means dying and rising with Christ every day that we live, facing temptation & tough situations with the words: "I am baptized!"*
- 15. "Using" the Lord's Supper means receiving it often (not just 4 times a year!) & hearing the words "given and shed for you." You are "worthy" (prepared) for it simply by admitting that you need Christ, & trusting his promise coming to you in the Lord's Supper.*
- 16. "Using" Confession & Absolution means actually doing it, so that the burden of our daily sinning is taken away and we hear Christ's word of forgiveness with our own name included: "Ed, by Christ's command I announce to you the forgiveness of the sin(s) you have just confessed." It's like dying and rising again, like baptism. A penitential funeral followed.*

III. Connecting Luther's Catechism-theology to discipleship and spirituality.

A. Christian Discipleship always means, of course, being a disciple of Jesus Christ. Saying yes to his invitation "Follow me." In the catechism Luther

makes one point central: "Jesus Christ is MY Lord." In the New Testament that same confession is at the center of discipleship. What kind of Lordship is that? One important text is Matthew 20 where Jesus specifies that his authority is not "authority over," but "authority under," supporting, sustaining his disciples all the way to "giving his life as a ransom" for them. What kind of "following" comes from that sort of Lordship? Bonhoeffer articulated it this way: "When our Lord Christ bids us come and follow him, he bids us come and die with him." We all do die. But there are two ways to do it. One is clutching what we have "for dear life," and dying that way. The other is clinging to Christ (and his Gospel) and dying that way. Disciples of Christ, said Luther, are "little Christs."

B. Christian Spirituality in NT language is "being led by the Holy Spirit." Not all references in the Scriptures to God's Spirit are speaking of the "Holy" Spirit. "Spirit" both in Hebrew and in Greek is the word for wind, for breath. It signals power—to move things, to make alive. Even apart from Christ, God's power operates in the cosmos—as in all the data of the first article of the Creed. When the NT speaks of the "Holy" Spirit, the adjective adds something very specific. Bob Bertram liked to put it this way: the Holying Spirit is the Healing Spirit, the spirit sinners need to survive, to be re-enlivened with God's own Wind—and not simply "blown away." Therefore, no surprise, when NT writers speak of that Holying Spirit, it is always connected to Christ. "Life in the Spirit" comes when Christians are "led by the Holy Spirit,"

and that Spirit's leading always leads us to Christ. So the explanation of the creed's third article in the Small Catechism goes like this: "I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to him. But the Holy Spirit . . . calls, gathers, enlightens, sanctifies and preserves [sinners] in union with Jesus Christ in the one true faith." Christian spirituality is living 24/7 "in union with Jesus Christ." Especially in the Gospel of John, this Christ-connecting agenda of the Holy Spirit is driven home over and over again. The Holy Spirit "will not speak on his own, but will take what is mine and declare it to you." And Paul is not far behind, for example, in Galatians 5 where "belonging to Christ Jesus" and "living by the Spirit" and "walking by the Spirit" are all synonyms.

For both discipleship and spirituality the focus of the catechisms is living by faith in Christ out in the world of daily work and daily callings. It is a clear alternative, even antithesis, to the monastic heritage of Luther's early adult years. Not withdrawing from daily life's realities for spiritual agendas, but taking Christ-connected faith out into the worldly agendas where God has placed me. Jesus' final words to Peter in John's Gospel (chapter 21) push the point. Even as you are taken "where you do not wish to go," even there, "Follow me." There is no worldly turf that is off limits for "following Christ as Lord" and being "led by the Spirit."

Charity

Colleagues,

This week's ThTh posting is the text of the first two pages of the Summer Newsletter '05, LUTHERAN URBAN MISSION SOCIETY, 5 West King Edward Avenue, Vancouver, BC Canada. Writer is Canadian Lutheran Pastor Brian Heinrich, once-upon-a-time TA in systematic theology at Seminex, class of 1983. As a "street priest" for LUMS, Brian's parish is what the locals call the "East Side," the scruffy side of town in Vancouver, British Columbia, the southwestern corner of Canada. His people, the rejects of this international metropolis, huddle here for survival. Brian and his LUMS colleagues join other Christians as Christ's emissaries—for care and redemption—in this conflicted corner of the world. Their website is

Peace & joy!

Ed Schroeder

CHARITY

One of the places we stopped on our Good Friday Procession this year [through the streets of Vancouver] was the office of the politician who introduced a bill to prevent street people from begging. A few days earlier my advocate colleague here at First United [the church-base home for this ecumenical ministry] asked me for a suggestion for content as she was to speak at this particular station. I replied that the Master Himself

(standing in continuity with ancient tradition) was pretty explicit on this one, & that we have a direct saying from the Lord, "Give to the one who asks of you!" And the context suggests generously (in an "Abba"/parental/God-like way) not just to satisfy any minimum requirement! (Matthew 5:42).

Many people ask me what to do when confronted by the growing number of beggars on our downtown streets (spreading even into fashionable West End locations now!). In complete contradiction to the Lord's imperative I usually recommend that people don't give to the panhandler, but instead, offer to buy food or cigarettes or whatever it might be. This will sometimes dissuade the beggar & usually assuage the beggee. In my capacity as street priest I give a limited amount, for which I am reimbursed by our community, usually (but not always) to those whom I know & usually (but, again, not always) in smaller denominations. But on any given wander about downtown I might be hit upon by as many as 25-30 beggars & sheer force of numbers limits me as our resources are not endless.

In the last paragraph I only hinted at but didn't yet address the judgement call. One of my favourite patristic heroes is St. John Chrysostom. In the same vein as the Lord, he says, it is not our place to interrogate the asker, circumspection is not our business, responding is. So our modern prevarications are exposed & justly set aside. The appropriate humane response to plea is share. Personally I am humbled by beggars. It is my conviction that it takes incredible courage to ask.

What immediately follows the afore-mentioned saying of Jesus is more of His wisdom on giving (that we usually hear in the Ash Wednesday Liturgy) that suggests giving benefits the giver (Matthew 6:1-4). Alms-giving, Jesus says, is for the giver's good & well being, not the recipient's! Giving is part of spiritual health. Giving is for our own good! Because... giving

is a divine attribute. Who is God, but the One who gives us life & consistently sustains that life by repeated benefactions? By giving we participate in the divine action. Giving is a lesson in holiness, godliness. And what is the character of God's giving? Again just a few lines earlier (Matthew 5:45), God causes His sun to shine on the bad as well as the good & His beneficent rains to fall on the dishonest as well as the honest. God gives generously, indiscriminately, lavishly, unstintingly. It is the divine character. It is the nature of Godness. Which we in these same lines are invited to participate in. "You must be like your dad. Godlike, Giving, Generous" (5:48).

Does this sound reminiscent of LUMS founding concepts? Quite marvelously from the outset we have believed that our mission is bifocal. Not just a one-way flow of having suburban churches coming to the inner city poor. But that somehow those churches were also being evangelized by the opportunity to serve the needy. Gospeled by giving. St. Francis' prayer reminds us, "it is by giving that we receive." If our hands are already full, if we are receiving an alternative reward, we've missed the opportunity. We've settled for a cheaper imitation reward that will ultimately prove empty & unrewarding. We don't need to receive compensations for giving. Giving itself is the reward. God has already superabundantly blessed you if you are in a position to be the giver. Your sibling, the begger, does not share that same advantage. Therefore, share. Express the divine nature in you. Act divinely, be extravagant. Without expectation of return or compensation.

In this whole segment of the gospel Jesus is teaching what the reign of God is like, in contrast to the old way of doing things that currently holds sway. In the reign of God the poor possess (5:1), (the rich who "have" are dispossessed! cf Luke 1:53). In the old way, (that still holds sway) you are a wiley

politician who makes sure that you get the most press coverage you can for your charity dollar, so you help build a public stadium but you make sure your name is on it in big letters. You (sell if you can get the suckers to buy them, or if not ok) give away “free” t-shirts, mugs, pencils with your logo on it, & convince the users to sport your advert as fashionable! (Amazing!!! the persuasive power of advertising!) “We’d like to thank all our contributors that made this possible... endless list of corporate benefactors & logos...” immediate investment advertising return, reward got. But the Lord says in the reign of God giving isn’t like that. Instead you just do it. “Abba” God notices. It expresses the divine character. In the reign of God we don’t need incentives to be good. If you require compensation it is not truly giving, it is an economic exchange & the divine opportunity is missed. The poor offer us a divine opportunity.

I intentionally chose to title this reflection “charity,” though charity smacks of negative connotation these days. The currently politically correct saying is, “justice not charity” as if charity were a bad thing! But I would like to argue for the redemption of charity. Charity is too good for us to give up on. We often hear 1 Corinthians 13 read at weddings, which I think confuses us. The *charitas* described there is Divine love. Charity is the character of God. “*Ubi caritas et amor, deus ibi est.*” “Wherever love & charity are, God is there.”

It is godly to give.

Part of the divine opportunity we at LUMS offer the faithful is a possibility to express the divine character in them. From the outset we’ve recognized that ministry & service were a gospel mission for the churches as much as the needy.

Our mission statement begins, “in response to the Gospel...” In

other words, because God has first gifted us, with life, with sustenance, with the Beloved Jesus, our charitas is the response, the echo, the ripplewave that continues to perpetuate the divine action in the universe. We are not giving, we receive. We have the privilege of acting like God.

We need to clarify this scriptural, Christian, redemptive perspective on giving for ourselves & our support constituency. If we succumb to the old way of economics offering reward points & incentives for charity, we miss the opportunity to illustrate & incarnate the reign of God, where giving is its own reward.

Pastor Brian

P.S. from E .S.

Check the LUMS website to learn more of “charitas incarnate” in Vancouver.

Theology of the Cross, the Melody of Three Books for Review

Colleagues,

Three books came my way for review at the end of summer. At first glance they all looked different. But now that I’ve read them, they are all singing the same tune, theologia crucis, the theology of the cross.. Here’s the evidence. Peace & Joy!

David Schneider. ARROWS OF LIGHT. DEVOTIONS FOR WORLDWIDE CHRISTIANS. Kearney, Nebraska: Morris Publishing. 2005. Paper. 305 pp. \$10.

Art Simon. REDISCOVERING THE LORD'S PRAYER. Minneapolis: Augsburg Books. Paper. 135 pp. Online \$9.99.

Douglas John Hall. BOUND AND FREE. A THEOLOGIAN'S JOURNEY. Minneapolis: Fortress Press. Paper. xii, 156 pp. Online \$17.

Three senior citizen Lutheran theologians, though one disclaims the Lutheran label, give us food for thought, and for edification. This trio of "seventy-somethings," each coming from a distinctive workworld in the life of the Christian church—overseas missions, prophet for the oppressed, academe, respectively—share with us what they've learned—and hope we won't forget—about faith and life grounded in the theology of the cross.

David Schneider is flat-out pastoral. He's preaching to us in daily parcels (never more than two pages) from a near half-century as missionary in the Philippines, Mexico, South Africa and most recently in Kazakhstan. His devotions are regularly linked to slice-of-life episodes of his ministry in those places, his encounters with "worldwide Christians." We learn early on that missionaries don't always do it right, David included. Right alongside the episodes where the Gospel "clicked" as liberating Good News for people he served and for himself, he tells of boo-boos that he regrets, glitches that smothered the Gospel. Such remorseful encounters prompt him to

say: "Looking back with clear-eyed hindsight, I begin to see things I could have said... Why didn't I...? Why didn't I . . .?" So he needs for himself the same Good News he's called to proclaim. "I struggle with the feeling of failure but finally am led again to Jesus Christ . . . wounded and bruised for my sin and failure. The message I speak to others is also the medicine for my own failings."

The "uppers" of his pastoral experience are more plentiful than "downers," though often these too are linked to grisly realities. E.g., the fate of a white fellow Lutheran, who with his wife had just been guests in Schneiders' home at the "black" seminary in Kwazulu-Natal, and was murdered on the way home, victim of the racial wars in apartheid South Africa. We learn how the gospel did indeed work as balm in that gory Gilead—for the survivors, and for us as Dave crosses that same Gospel over to us readers. Some of these life-slices, though ultimately not laughable, are nevertheless humorous. E.g., the storm-tossed young woman he rescued from the street during a typhoon in Manilla, (after he'd driven the visiting Missouri Synod president back to his hotel) who, as she jumped into the car, offered him "anything, anything you want" for his kindness. He couldn't remember a single seminary class where anything like this had been a case study.

The Schneiders once hosted a Crossings workshop during their time in Mexico. Dave had gotten a taste of Crossings during a sabbatical and asked Marie and me to "come on down and do one with us." Though it was just for an extended weekend, we met his people, worked with them and saw Pastor Dave in action. His pastoral work there shows up in these pages as he "crossed" God's law and promise to the sinner-saints of Guadalajara—including the pastor himself—and then invites us to "go and do likewise."

The title "Arrows of Light" signals that not all is bright and beautiful among worldwide Christians—both preachers and parishioners. But, as St. John tells us in the prologue of his gospel, "in the Word made flesh, the light is shining into the darkness, and the darkness does not overcome it." Page after page Dave switches on THE Light. For your own illumination from these arrows of light, contact Dave directly at <djschnitz@juno.com>[\$10 plus \$3 p&h.]

Art Simon is a dear buddy of mine from seminary days a half-century ago. >From his first pastoral assignment with the poor in a New York City congregation, he has been a voice crying in the wilderness of our American culture, a voice for the rejected and neglected. These are the very folks whom Katrina put in our face again, now 30-plus years since Art left parish ministry to become founder and head honcho of BREAD FOR THE WORLD, a Christian political advocacy group that has benefitted millions of the world's poorest people. His book by that same title, a manifesto for the movement, won the national Religious Book Award (1975). The wilderness in which he's been preaching is not only the ironically empty desert of American affluence, but also the hearing malady of American churches. They show themselves more tuned in to the overtures of that affluent culture than to the voice of the One who "taught us how to pray" the Lord's Prayer.

Art takes us through that primal prayer, probing its depths while also weaving it into the threads of his own biography after, lo, these many years. There is no hype about his mastery of the Lord's prayer. His opening chapter is "A Confession. Let me tell you the unflattering truth. For most of my life I found the Lord's prayer boring. Of course, that says much about me and nothing about the prayer. I grew up with it from infancy

[his dad was a Lutheran pastor], and studied its petitions in confirmation class—first my own, later those I taught. I appreciated its theology, but praying it didn't especially move me." Of course, it was always used in church, and "rattle it off we did."

But then "something happened [that] I had assumed would never happen to me, something that violated every bone in my Lutheran body. My wife wanted out of our marriage. I'll say more about this later, but the point is that this personal adversity compelled me to pray as I had never prayed before. It made me think more deeply about many things I had taken for granted, including my truly desperate need of God. In the process I discovered the prayer of Jesus to be a hidden treasure."

"It became a DOOR that opened a way of coming to God for healing. I began to realize that the prayer has more to do with listening to God and living in God's presence than with speaking to God. It is more about purpose than about talk. The prayer now helps me want the right things and let God guide my life. This, I believe, is what Jesus intended when he presented the prayer to his disciples. He was not saying 'Look, boys, you can do this in twenty seconds,' though he did tell them that piling up a lot of sanctimonious words is the wrong way to pray. Instead, in a few simple phrases he opened the way to a life of hope deeply rooted in God."

"In this book I offer some personal reflections on the Lord's Prayer. It is not a scholarly analysis, but thoughts from a journey still in progress. . . . On the pages that follow I want to tell you as simply and clearly as I can how this prayer speaks to me, in the hope that it will enrich your life in God. Perhaps you too can rediscover its extraordinary power."

That's what Art sets out to do—and he does it. His book is not

a “here’s how to do it” petition by petition, but “here’s what each petition now does for me—and my journey is still in progress. My hope is that it can help you on your life’s journey too.”

Douglas John Hall claims not to be a Lutheran. He says he’s happily at home in the Reformed tradition, even the Canadian version thereof in his native land. Which is ironic since he is doubtless the most widely-read English-language advocate of Luther’s theology of the cross. Which theology of the cross is, he says, the “key signature” in which he has written all his theology. Later on he says that it is not only the key, but the “cantus firmus,” the melody, “of all my thought and writing.” He borrowed that “key” metaphor from Juergen Moltmann, also a happy-to-be-at-home theologian in the Reformed tradition. Also a major spokesman for theology of the cross in his classic book of a generation ago, *THE CRUCIFIED GOD*, a bizarre expression also coming from Luther. Moltmann says in that book (quoting W. von Loewenich) “Luther developed his *theologia crucis* as a programme of critical and Reformation theology. *Theologia crucis* is not a single chapter in theology, but the key signature for all Christian theology. It is a completely distinctive kind of theology. It is the point from which all theological statements which seek to be Christian are viewed.”

Despite his own disavowal, you wonder, is he is, or is he ain’t, a Lutheran? He rubs it in by titling his book with Luther’s own paradoxical pair of terms for Christian Freedom, *BOUND AND FREE*. And why does he tell us he isn’t? It may come as a surprise to some of you dear readers that I’m not going to touch those questions. Instead I’m “just” going to make a pitch for this book, his own “looking back” over his life and work. The three core chapters of the book (80 of 130 pages) were

initially lectures delivered to ELCA pastors in New England: "A Theologians's Journey: Where I Have Been, Where I Am Now, The Journey Ahead."

Some (almost) asides in his story fascinate, yes, even jolt.

- 1. How Canadians are different, not at all clones of US citizens with an occasional quirky accent. "Decidedly part of our national character [is] that we have an innate awareness of the real difficulty of the human enterprise and an innate skepticism concerning schemes and dreams that minimize that difficulty."*
- 2. How his own "exceptional ear for music" shaped his theological journey. "Neither of my parents were musical; my father was tone-deaf, in fact, so I know perfectly well that it is sheer gift." How does that gift play out? Here's one way: Anglo-Saxon music "draws heavily on the MAJOR keys Life, however, is often written in the MINOR key. No once-for-all resolution in some major chord." Theology of the cross is theology in the minor key.*
- 3. How the theology of the cross finds few hearers in the USA (and Canada too) where the chronic optimism of Anglo-Saxon culture finds theologies of glory much more attractive. Even in the churches.*

Hall's first big splash onto the theological scene was his book 30 years ago proposing an "indigenous theology of the cross," i.e., indigenous to North America. Its title: LIGHTEN OUR DARKNESS.

Darkness? Our optimistic national faith in the USA doesn't believe we have much darkness. That's the problem of the others. And if it does surface in our land now and then, we can fix it, and in principle the fix is easy. It just takes money. Witness the US binge to "fix" what Katrina wrecked. 200 billion

should do it.

Cross-theology first off probes the darkness, listening for, and then listening to, God's voice in the chaos and catastrophe. These are always variations on God's own cantus firmus "you have been weighed and found wanting." Theologies of glory can even respond to Katrinas with "days of prayer" professing our faith in God despite what "nature" did to us. But that demonstrates our deafness to God's voice to the darklings when Katrinas come. Jesus' own ear heard a grim message when God sent darkness. His counsel: Except ye repent, you shall all likewise perish. Theology of the cross has a place for repentance. Glory theologies do not.

One more thing. Hall's third chapter "The Journey Ahead" is a feisty set of vexations for Christian theologians who are coming on the scene. Here's his proposed agenda: Moving Beyond Christendom, Hospitality Toward the "Other," The Necessity of Jesus, The Human Vocation in the Midst of Creation. And finally his call for A Thinking Faith.

In that first book on an indigenous theology of the cross Hall admitted that cross-theology was a "thin tradition" throughout the 2000-year history of the Christian Church. But it is the theology that is worth giving one's life for—as did the Originator in his body on the tree. Hall urges us readers to follow in His train.

Summa: All three of these (real or crypto) Lutherans, now goldie-oldies, are theologians of the cross. All three weave that theology into their own life stories—in world missions, in appealing for and with the oppressed, in the halls of academe. A trilogy of autobiographical theologia crucis. You don't find that everywhere, but you do find it here.

Another View of the Blame Game

Last week I read an email from Gail, a woman in Australia, who compared America's relationship with President Bush to battered wife syndrome. She talked about the way he lies to us and we let him get away with it. She brought up the reality that he's driven our friends away by his policies and we don't call him to account.

Gail said that her letter was a long distance intervention. She said she couldn't stay quiet any longer after seeing the devastation of Katrina and especially the incredible governmental incompetence in the aftermath on the Gulf Coast. She said we're an interesting, beautiful, creative country and that our friends will come back and we'll find a much better leader if we just throw George out.

How I wish I could sit down and talk with Gail. The horror of what's happening in our country that she so creatively outlines as battered wife syndrome hasn't been missed by all of us – in fact, a lot of us know that we've turned down a road that will end in our destruction.

Unfortunately, as bad as George is, the problem is really worse than having him as our president. We are the problem. We cannot cope with the truth that we are not living up to our own ideals. We cannot believe that we are no longer a beacon of hope for suffering people around the world. We are the most wealthy and powerful nation in the world and we believe everyone wants to be like us. We cannot allow ourselves to see anything that contradicts our long held, cherished perceptions of ourselves.

To use Gail's analogy, the rich woman would rather stay with the abusive husband than risk losing the house, the cars, the clothes, the country club membership, the frequent flyer miles, the health insurance, her part of the investments. The rich woman would rather stay with the abusive husband than risk being exposed as "just another battered wife." We aren't "just like everyone else." We're the country that won WWII, we're the winner of the Cold War, we're the sole surviving superpower, we're America.

Even those of us who have never heard of John Winthrop, first governor of Massachusetts, have internalized part of the basic idea of his sermon, "A Model of Christian Charity." He wrote and delivered this sermon while he was still on the ship, the *Arabella*, bound for North America to set up New England with the Massachusetts Bay Company in 1630. He said that we would be "a city set on a hill," that our government would be copied by nations around the world. "We shall find that the God of Israel shall be among us, when ten of us shall be able to resist a thousand of our enemies; when He shall make us a praise and glory that men shall say of succeeding plantations, 'the Lord make it like that of New England.'"

We believe we are special in some fundamental way that makes us superior to other nations. And even in the face of so much evidence to the contrary, we cannot allow ourselves to see what's right in front of our faces.

But Winthrop also issued a warning: "The eyes of all people are upon us, so that if we deal falsely with our God in this work we have undertaken, and so cause Him to withdraw His present help from us, we shall be made a story and a byword through the world."

We have shifted from working on behalf of God (building the city

set on a hill) to thinking we are God. We are drunk on power. We have been so successful that we believe we can control everyone and everything – and that we have the right to do so.

What is scariest for me right now is not George, but the realization that God seems to be withdrawing “His present help from us” to use Winthrop’s words. It seems that this blindness and deafness about the truth that we are experiencing is not just the “normal” denial of a battered woman. This is spiritual blindness and deafness that the One who really is in power has allowed to overtake us.

It’s eerie for those of us who can see and hear at least a little bit. It’s like walking through the valley of dry bones in Ezekiel, desperately calling out to our brothers and sisters to wake up, but not hearing the rattle of bones coming together or seeing the flesh being reformed on the skeletons. What is it going to take? How many disastrous wake up calls must we endure?

One initial idea might be to admit that we are drunk on power and that we cannot free ourselves. “We admit that we are powerless over our desire to play God and that our lives have become unmanageable.” Many Americans know these words, slightly altered, from Step One of the 12 Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous. Can we admit we are powerless over our desire to run the world, which we cloak in the rhetoric of taking democracy to oppressed people in other countries (however, only oppressed people in countries rich in oil)?

This isn’t about red states or blue states, liberals or conservative. This isn’t even about all the moral issues we love to polarize ourselves around. This is about the fundamental way we live in the world. We’re on our way to being a byword (a person or thing proverbial as being contemptible or ridiculous, Webster) throughout the world.

Will Christian church leaders call our people to turn around? To trust Jesus, not just for our eternity, but also for today and tomorrow? Will we lead them through the chaos of genuine change, even if that change doesn't lead directly to the Promised Land, but must go through the wilderness first?

Biblically, the measure of a nation is how it treats the stranger, the widow and the orphan. The video tape from the Gulf Coast shows that we have been weighed in the balance and been found wanting.

As Christians we need to work side by side with our Atheist, Muslim and Hindu neighbors to rebuild the infrastructure of this nation. We need to be genuine partners, not paternalistic overlords who always get the last word because we hold the money. THEN we will have a credible Christian witness when someone asks us about the reason for the hope that is in us.

Katrina

Colleagues,

The only ThTh reader I know of living in the cauldron of Katrina's cataclysm is Elise Turner in Jackson, Mississippi. I asked her for some words she might want to pass on to the rest of us. Here's what she sent.

Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

Dear Ed, This is more like free association than coherent writing.

*Fondly,
Elise*

Byline: Disaster Central

isolation

fear

numbness

anxiety

exhaustion

weariness

sadness

inertia

As I think on the experiences of Katrina, I had several obvious choices of theme. But the news media and local preachers have worn these out. What do I have to say that has spiritual meaning for me, thoughts that have not been thought to conclusion; nor talked to death? The details of fallen trees, stifling heat, and reversion to a hunter/gatherer existence are in every newspaper. Skip them.

Clearing my mind, I jotted down the words that described my feelings during the howling storm, but especially in the unfolding aftermath. What is the pattern? Why do these words collected together seem familiar? Then I recognized them—the disciples in the aftermath of the crucifixion. After witnessing

the torture and death of the One they loved best. Even though they were given “storm warnings.” It was worse than they expected. Not a hard time, but an overwhelming flood of horror. Scattered, afraid, leaderless. Finally they crept back together, and waited—for what— they weren’t sure. How do you rebuild a shattered life, a shattered love? Perhaps they bickered and became angry with one another. Why didn’t you...? You should have...! The money’s gone; now what? We have His promises— what are they worth? Tending to the dead as balm for the living.

But their situation is not ours. No limbo of uncertainty or abandonment. No waiting to see if God will keep promises. When delivered in spirit, we can sweat out the rest. No need to ask silly questions like “why do bad things happen to good people?” More sound theologically to ask “why do good things ever happen to any of us?” Secure in the knowledge that all circumstances are controlled by Him for his purposes; and financial ruin, loss of health, death of loved ones, and heaviness of heart cannot separate us from Him. Sometimes, that’s the best you can do—nail down that bit of faith and trust Him to tighten his grip. Shrieking winds and crashing floods can’t pull you away. Even when you let go in despair, to slide away into blessed nothingness.

After everything is over, the sun comes out. You blink with surprise and wander out to see a different world. The wreckage, other stunned survivors. Overwhelming tasks. But you bear the Mark of the Lamb. What is it? The print of His hand where he gripped you so tightly. Not of our effort, but His. Undeserved, unearned, unfailing, unending. That’s the Good News!

On The Fourth Anniversary of 9/11, “Rays of Light”: Law and Promise in the Wake of Katrina

Colleagues,

Today’s ThTh posting is the work of Michael Hoy. Michael works bi-vocationally as Pastor of Holy Trinity Lutheran Church (ELCA) and as Dean of the Lutheran School of Theology, both of them in St. Louis, Missouri. Peace and joy!

Ed Schroeder

On The Fourth Anniversary of 9/11, “Rays of Light”: Law and Promise in the Wake of Katrina

Ray Nagin, the Mayor of New Orleans, says that we are just beginning to see “rays of light” following the devastation that hit his city and most of the southeastern US coast 10 days ago. He warns that thousands of bodies may still be found under the murky waters.

Any “rays of light” from post-storm-progress in bringing aid to people who were without aid, and restoration of property to that which has been damaged, would miss the rays of light that come through the Law and the Promise.

Here are some clues to the Law's rays – singeing though they be:

1. Katrina is a name derived most likely from the Greek word “katheros,” which means “pure” or “cleansing.” (There are other derivations, but we’ll stick with this early Roman reading of the name). Might it be God’s “cleansing” of us? God’s own critique? Only two groups referred to the storm as bearing “the wrath of God,” both for disparate and I think horribly misguided reasons. The religious right saw the storm as the “wrath of God” on gays and lesbians in New Orleans. If this were not such a serious matter, I would laugh at the religious right. As it is, the religious right is part of the problem in America. It is the new version of the Deutsche Christen [the nationalist, Hitler-friendly, church of the Third-Reich], against which we may want to see a “time for confessing.” But let me save that point for a future article. The other group using the term is the Al Qaeda. They claimed that this storm was the wrath of God “on America.” Here are terrorists who, sad to say, have the better argument for a godless country than our own religious right. They, the Al Qaeda, could benefit from greater humility in the judgment, knowing whose wrath it is about which they speak. Yet the judgment of God, in the final analysis, is on us all, and no one escapes its critique. Let’s not so universalize that problem so as to continue to excuse an America that goes merrily on its oblivious path of self-centered-and-blind-existence, unaware that the day of wrath is at hand. Let’s start with the log in our own eye, before we think about the splinter in our neighbor’s – something that America is not very good at, even as we continue to take the splinters out of Iraq.

2. While there were several “warnings” that the storm was coming, the people who couldn’t escape its path were those racially poor, homeless, and elderly, without even basic transportation, let alone other necessities of life. Those bearing the brunt of the storm were the poorest in our country. Mississippi is the poorest state in the union. That’s a warning for all of us. We didn’t care for these poor. We didn’t provide for them. We may not have realized they were even there. Fleeing the storm will not spare us from those we left behind. God takes no pleasure in our injustice to the poor.
3. The National Geographic October 2004 issue featured an article that spoke hypothetically of a storm hitting New Orleans and the cataclysmic damage it would cause. 80% of the city, it said, would be under water. Thousands would die. “The Federal Emergency Management Agency lists a hurricane strike on New Orleans as one of the most dire threats to the nation, up there with a large earthquake in California [that has happened, of course, on April 18, 1906 in San Francisco-it may not be the last time] or a terrorist attack on New York City [that, too, has happened on 9/11]. Even the Red Cross no longer opens hurricane shelters in the city, claiming the risk to its workers too great.” Interestingly, though, it was the Red Cross that was most ready to step in and assist the poor people of New Orleans who were without food and water. Meanwhile, FEMA and other governmental agencies couldn’t make up their minds that this was the right time to act. People suffered and died for 4 days during this bureaucratic mess! One legislator in New Orleans pronounced the judgment against this failure quite bluntly, “God would not be pleased.” Right idea; wrong tense. God is not pleased!
4. On the day after the storm, the governor of Mississippi,

Haley Barbour, was flying over Biloxi, MS, and said, "I can only imagine that this is what Hiroshima looked like 60 years ago." Did we learn from Hiroshima? The fourth anniversary of 9/11 is just around the bend. Did we learn from 9/11? Will the waves of refugees and the rising floods of gas prices help lead us as a nation beyond "God bless America" to "Lord, have mercy"? One can only hope. But if 9/11 didn't do it, if the former storms in Florida didn't do it, if Hiroshima didn't do it, I'm not betting on Katrina. Still, God's judgment cannot be avoided. You can flee, but you cannot hide. America, we need to repent. I say this as a fellow American. I plead it as a fellow American. We have failed to please God. We have only managed to make matters worse with our own delays. President Lincoln pleaded for America to repent 140 years ago in the midst of the Civil War. You'd think our own President would do the same, especially given the fact that we are very much in a war with God, one we cannot win. How many lives, how many catastrophes, how much pain and sorrow will we suffer before responding as a nation?

5. A couple of sobering biblical illustrations to make the point: One from the book of Job. The mysterious counselor Elihu speaks to Job who cries out, "I am innocent" (34:5), "the mighty are taken away by no human hand" (34:20). Even nature itself is God's nature (37:1-12). Job has no counter-response to Elihu, as he does to the previous three "friends." In Ch. 38ff., Yahweh chimes in. Job's final response: "I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes." Of course, if you want something from the New Testament, there is always Jesus' own reading of the newspapers in Luke 13:1-5, with his refrain, "unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did."
6. We cannot justify our existence. How appropriate that

Luther noted the economic theology that seems to speak so well to our own time of indebtedness (in so many ways, but also concretely), that the God who “out of pure, fatherly, divine goodness and mercy” gives us everything we need from day to day is the one we abandon. And so, when God comes collecting (“For all of this I owe it to God to thank and praise, serve and obey him”), our pockets are bare. We have nothing that we can bring to make things right with God. We try passing the political buck on the failures to respond, but (as was said by another Missouri-based president, Harry Truman) “the buck stops here.” He pointed to himself. We can’t afford to.

Now for the Gospel’s rays – the Light that enlightens the world (using the same corresponding numbers, in reverse order).

6. We cannot justify our existence. But there is One who is our justification. Luther went on in the economic language into the second article of the creed to say that Jesus is “my Lord.” And he defined Lord as an owner – a new owner, one who buys back rejects (call us Hummers). On his cross, this Lord takes our response that we can’t afford to make, and says the buck stops with him. Maybe now we can begin to hum.
5. To be a Christian, one under this new ownership, our first, foremost, and daily response is precisely to repent. We can be free to do that, now that our Lord has turned the corner for us all. Repentance is a gift we get to do, not just an obligation we have to do. “Repent, and believe the good news,” Jesus said. He gave us reason to turn.
4. America wants to pride itself on God-language. But right now it uses the God-language that brings condemnation rather than justification and sanctification. We can’t

get to the promise without the cross, and our passing through it. But we get to bear our cross. That is at the heart of the promise. Theologia crucis [theology of the cross] is the path for us, not theologia gloriae [theology of glory]. History, it is said, repeats itself. The new history we forge as a faithful people repents itself. Trusting the cross, we can take truly new bold steps into God's future.

3. Let's start with a candid admission (confession): we blew it in New Orleans. President Bush says that he is going to get to the bottom of the blunder in failures to respond. That's like closing the barn door after the horse has already gotten out (or more accurately, after the poor creature has already perished in the flames, or the barn has collapsed). We can confess the truth because we trust the truth of forgiveness. All of this after-math that tries to get us into the positive ledger while someone else takes the blame (a negative ledger) is not going to work. It also makes the problem worse, because it is putting the focus on ourselves, more justifying of our existence, rather than seeing the focus as the devastation that has already happened because of our neglect, things done and left undone. Confess is what we get to do because of the Lord Whom we trust who will forgive.
2. The first of the beatitudes begins with the poor: "Blessed are the poor, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:1; Luke 6:20). Someday there is a leveling, sooner than we think. How can so many poor be right in our own backyard, while we are touting the banner of "Christian America"? Maybe we all need to see just how impoverished we are. "The poor you will always have with you, but you will not always have me," Jesus

said (John 12:8). He said it to Judas, who probably wasn't listening, too busy justifying his own existence, counting his money. Jesus did not intend that the poor should be neglected. But he did see that there is a way to care for them that comes through the lens of his [Jesus'] passing through death and resurrection for all.

The wrath of God is abated by the One who take the rays of destruction for us, refracting them through the lens of his cross. Apology IV of the Augsburg Confession provides a promising beginning to an exegesis of 2 Corinthians 3 (para. 133ff.), which dear mentor Bob Bertram (+) explored further in his soon-to-be-published "Postmodernity's CRUX: A Theology of the Cross for the Postmodern World." We cheapen the Law's critique, hiding under the veil of Moses, engaging in either legalism or antinomianism (Luther saw them as two foxes with their tails tied together), but do not get past our "opinio legis" (our leaning toward the law) in our reading of Scripture or our living of life – all along missing the truth of what the Law says. We keep the veil of the Law over our eyes because we think we cannot stand the brightness of the Law's glory – and we are right. We, by ourselves, cannot. But Jesus the Christ, who takes the radiating sting of those rays of glory into his own death on the cross, frees us to see his glory on the cross – and to share in that new glory for us and for all. He is our Ray of Light, our glory.

As the motto at Valparaiso University says, "In your light, we see light." (Psalm 36:9) Ray of Light, Jesus the Christ, help us to see the logs in our eyes, and to reach out to a hurting world in humility and grace.

Michael Hoy

Responses to ThTh 376 about Carl Braaten's Open Letter to the ELCA Bishop

Colleagues,

Quite a few responses came in to last week's posting. Here are some of them. Peace & joy!

Ed Schroeder

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1. A "writer and independent [= I've got no church teaching job] scholar" from Minneapolis, Minnesota. Thank you for your Thursday Theology of August 25, "Carl Braaten's Jeremiad." I'd like to make one small comment about the following statement:

"Both the traditionalists and the revisionists in the ELCA [sc. on the homosexuality debate] are regularly arguing their cases from 'just take the Bible for what it says,' both implicitly claiming that hermeneutics is no big deal."

While what you say here is true, it is nevertheless somewhat misleading. Now, many folks would label me a revisionist, i.e. one who advocates for change in the ELCA's policies regarding sexuality. It's true that we do regularly hear so-called revisionists arguing from

exegesis: "My exegesis is bigger than your exegesis," we sometimes say. Yet I'd like to remind your readers that revisionists have also been regularly heard making the case for policy change from Lutheran law/Promise hermeneutic. Not always, not everyone, but often enough. In fact, it was heard a couple of times in Orlando [=last months' ELCA national assembly]—sadly, not by bishops or theologians. (I was there as a Voting Member, and would have offered the case myself had I been so lucky as to get in front of a live microphone.)

Indeed, the folks at Goodsoil (revisionists, all) sport this snazzy Luther quote on their website:

"Christ offers us such freedom that we must simply tolerate no master over our conscience but insist on our baptism and as people called to Christ and made righteous and holy through him say, "This is my right, my treasure, my work and my defense against all sin and unrighteousness (which the law can produce and lay upon me)".

And Bishop Mark Hanson himself, whom I will not label a revisionist in public, said this recently on the "Grace Matters" radio program:

Question: "Bishop Hanson, do you believe in the Bible?"

Hanson: "No, I believe in the living Triune God, who meets us in the words of Scripture. But I don't believe in the Bible as the ****object**** of my faith. The object and the subject of my faith is the living God who took on human flesh in Jesus the Christ, whose spirit works through the biblical writers calling me to faith, bringing me to repentance, and freeing me in forgiveness, that I might immerse myself in the lives of my neighbors

in service, in the struggles for justice and peace in the world."

And I point to Timothy Hoyer, a frequent contributor to Crossings, as another example of one who "gets it."

Now, on the part of the so-called traditionalists, I must admit I've never, ever heard anyone arguing against policy change from a properly Lutheran law/Promise perspective. That is, with the possible exception of the blessed Gerhard Forde. (Now I say POSSIBLE exception because he was a bit sly on the topic of law and sexuality, grounding his conclusions in an odd concept of "symbolic participation" in a "unity in [biological] difference.") I'm not saying law/Promise arguments have never been made by traditionalists, I'm just saying I've never heard them—and, in the past five years, I've listened often and deeply.

2. An Anglican Divine in Saskatchewan Thanks for this. I was at a conference last week in Whitehorse, Yukon, where the Dean of the Cathedral showed me Braaten's letter. Amazing: my response to the Dean focused on the lack of Gospel-centredness... I will enjoy forwarding this on to him.

3. An ELCA Pastor in the Twin-Cities, Minnesota Easy there Ed!

You served up no picture of what the ELCA is becoming except another liberal protestant denomination that turns the Bible to whatever the social justice issue is of the day. Where is the law with your promise? I told you some time ago that you had changed my mind, however, after what I heard of the politics in play in Orlando I am not so sure anymore.

But yes, hermeneutics are important, and my colleague (who was a voting member) reports to me that it seems that there are two ways of reading the Bible and she (who voted for all three recs) doesn't think the two will be reconciled within this denomination.

I am disheartened that Dr. Braaten forgot about the great Advocate in his letter, I trust that emotions are high on his end. But, when I made my vows I too took them with an eye towards the day when I would be held to account for each soul that passed under my care.

And yes, I do want to know what would make us different from, say, the UCC were we to go the way of all American denominations casting further left while each state becomes more and more red? What's our message? Law and Promise? Where's the law for the left?

- 4. An ELCA Pastor in Ohio I was not aware of the letter to Bishop Hanson. Thanks for the early morning theological workout. I was privileged to have been a student of Walter Bouman, however, I must admit I was an arrogant senior who had just come back from internship and, of course, knew everything. I.e., Only after being in the parish did I start to absorb and really learn what Walter taught.*

I was at his funeral Aug. 23 and the image that echoed in my head as I was reading this TTh was that of Bishop Steve Bouman [Ed: Walt's cousin, preacher at the service] speaking about the Caravaggio (?) painting of Paul on the road to Damascus—Knocked flat on his back by the gospel. Bishop Bouman reflected that Walter had been knocked flat on his back by the resurrection and never got over it.

I bring this up because, although as a denomination I'm

not sure we in the ELCA are bowled over by the gospel in this way, there are certainly those in the church who “get it”, and who never get over it. When you’re flat on your back in the dust, denominationalism is adiaphora, it would seem, or maybe I don’t get it.

Thank you for pointing again to the Scarred Defense Attorney who is on our side. That alone knocks me off my high horse.

5. Retired ELCA Pastor in MassachusettsJust read the piece on Carl Braaten’s letter to Mark Hanson. Good analysis, etc. [A while ago] we visited with [so-and-so], a good friend of [X], one of the “dear departed” mentioned by Braaten laments who moved over to Rome. When X was leaving for Rome he sent this friend a letter, explaining his reason: He wanted to “be in a place where he could adore the Virgin Mary.” Sad if that was/is truly the deciding factor.
6. An ELCA Seminary ProfessorYour Braaten analysis. Wonderful summary! And response! Indeed, “someone of us needs to tell him”!
7. An ELCA Pastor in Missouri[In] the ecclesiology [of the “evangelical, catholic, and orthodox” folks], one gets the sense that “bigger is better” in understanding what church is really all about. That means, I think that whatever “we” ELCAers define by church ought not be by “individual, local preference” but had better mesh with what the “broadly based, ecclesial determination,” for which these theologians want to claim NT support. Well, I suppose that’s true in Acts 15, when Paul did in fact meet with his Jewish-Christian brothers [and sisters?]. But isn’t Paul more an apologist for the Gospel to the rest of the assembly, rather than allowing his “local preference” of bringing the Gospel to the

Gentiles be compromised? Wasn't the insistence that Luther ought NOT act by "local preference" more like the charge of his critics that he was "a wild boar in the vineyard"? Of course, when he did appear for a hearing—such as it was—before the "broadly based, ecclesial determination," the bigger church was NOT better. Anyway, the real point I want to make here is that I don't see any confessional grounding in AC 7 in what the "Lutheran" theologians of "e, c, and o" promulgate, let alone your marvelous point in your response to Carl (and, to me, a key issue in this whole debate today) that the hermeneutics of Apol. 4 are worth another look, also for our "Final Accounting."

8. A Lutheran Chaplain in Ohio I "had to" drop you a note on this one about Braaten's open letter. . . . As I continue on my own faith and ministry journey, I reflect on how deeply I have been infected with what I call "Seminex theology", Law-Gospel Reconstructionist theology, or theology based in the Augsburg Aha. I'm just winding up a year supervising chaplain residents. One of them is a Lutheran Deaconess who, of course, was schooled in Valpo [=Valparaiso University]. She was raised LCMS, but at some point came to the conclusion she had to jump ship. She calls it Valpo theology—and we both hope that those of us who "get it" will be able to continue spreading the word about our Eternal Defense Attorney whom you mention at the end of last week's posting.

Keep on keeping on!

9. A Lutheran Theology Professor in Canada. Superb, not just the correcting of facts (Pelikan and Neuhaus) but also dragging Braaten over Schroeder's Razor. Yeah, yeah, I know, it's not YOUR razor....

10. An ELCA seminary professor. I appreciated your "dialogue"

with Carl's open letter. I am particularly grateful for your persistent reminder that the gospel is always at the heart of everything that the church believes and does and that God's word is always law/gospel. I, like you, was disappointed that Carl never proposed any remedy for the malady which he laments and that he never noted that the church's life is dependent on the gracious good news which is the gospel. . . Christ's radical redemptive work which is the reason why the church exists for the sake of the world. How blessed we are that this Christ remains our precious Advocate.

11. Finally a lengthy one asking for a response. So I pass on this info about him. Dr. Jose (Joe) Fuliga is the retired former president of the Lutheran Church in the Philippines, also one time dean of the LCP theological seminary in Baguio. His doctoral dissertation in systematic theology (mentored by R. Bertram et al.) comes from Concordia Seminary (in the "good old days" of the early 1970s). Its title: "The Historical-Critical Method: The Dividing Wall Between the Conservatives and Moderates in the LCMS Controversy." On the ecumenical scene Joe has served as consultant and member of the drafting committee for the LWF Mission Statement and more recently as Tutor & Overseas Research Fellow with the St. Simon of Cyrene Theological Institute in the UK. He grew up in the Roman Catholic communion in the Philippines, moved to the Lutheran confession in his homeland after his own Augsburg Aha! He's an insider to both traditions. Dear Ed, I am appalled that the knowledgeable Lutheran theologians mentioned by Braaten could jump into the Roman Catholic ship. Many years ago, over 30 years to be exact, I thought the claim of the Lutheran News (now Christian News) editor Herman Otten that some of these men would convert to Roman Catholicism was preposterous. Herman

Otten's prediction, however, proved prophetic.

As a former Roman Catholic I would like to ask these men if they have considered seriously the teachings and practices of the Roman Catholic Church. Have they, for example, studied well: (1) How Peter and his successors became Popes? Have they accepted the RC teachings on Apostolic Succession and Papal infallibility? Why the papacy has almost been exclusively European? (2) How about the RC assertion that the ordination of Lutheran clergymen and their ministry with regards to sacramental rites are invalid? Do they now admit that their ministries for many, many years in the Lutheran Church have been invalid? (3) Have they accepted the teaching on compulsory clerical celibacy? (Check the website: www.rentapriest.com)? (4) What about the teachings on Purgatory and prayers for the dead? And on Limbo (Limbus Infantum and Limbus Patrum) although it is now considered pious opinion? Do they pray for their dead and say Mass for the dead?

(5) What about the place of Mary in the Church and on invoking her through prayers? Is she omnipresent so that she can hear the simultaneous prayers of Christians in various parts of the world? Is she omniscient so that she understands all the prayers in various languages? Almost every attribute and title given to Jesus is attributed to Mary: She was immaculately conceived, had a bodily assumption, is being considered co-redemptrix and now rules as the mother of the Church and the Queen of heaven and earth. There is a Sacred Heart of Jesus. And there is a Sacred Heart of Mary. Jesus is mediator. Mary is Mediatrix of all graces. Jesus was presented in the temple. There is also the presentation of Mary. Jesus remained celibate. Mary remained a virgin forever. There

are more miracles attributed to Mary and more feasts to honor her than all the miracles and feasts attributed to all the persons of the Trinity. In fact, there are more churches named after Mary than for all the persons in the Godhead. Do these theologians ever say the 150 prayers in the Rosary where one Our Father is said for every 10 Hail Marys? Have they studied the many apparitions and miracles attributed to Mary which number more than those attributed to any person in the Trinity?

(6) Have they thought of the invocation of the saints to whom specialized tasks had been assigned? Two hundred saints invoked in the past had been dropped by Vatican II in the 60s. Does this mean that prayers directed to them have all turned out to be useless? One saint, Joan of Arc, was declared a heretic on May 30, 1431. In 1920 she was canonized. The Old Testament saints, moreover, like Noah, Abraham, Moses, Job, etc., are not invoked at all!

(7) Have they considered the Roman Catholic teaching on non-separation of Church and State as exemplified by the Vatican? (8) Have they rejected Sola Scriptura as the basis of the Church's doctrine and practice? Or, have they accepted Tradition and the beliefs and practices promulgated by the Vatican supposedly based on Tradition? Has it become clear to them concerning the place and role of Scriptures and Tradition in the promulgation of dogmas and practices of the Church? What about the forced prohibition for centuries for lay people to read and interpret the Scriptures and for anyone to translate the Scriptures in the vernacular?

(9) What about the continuing practice of Indulgences?

(10) What about the denial of the sacraments for divorced persons and those who have not made a private confession to a priest? (11) Have they accepted transubstantiation

and the teachings and practices relative to Corpus Christi as Biblical? (12) How about the teaching on mortal and venial sins? (13) And the rejection for centuries of Scriptures in the vernacular and the Mass in the language of the people?

(14) Have they considered why many homosexuals and pedophiles been attracted to the priestly vocation in the Roman Catholic Church? A number of dioceses have declared bankruptcy due to lawsuits filed by victims of pedophile priests and the cover ups resorted to by a number of bishops in the RC Church. (15) Have they considered that feminism and the ordination of women have become a greater problem in the Roman Catholic Church than in any other Christian denomination? (16) What about the Roman Catholic teaching on population control, the use of the pill and the great poverty of many Catholic nations in South America and in the Philippines? (17) How about the failure of the Catholic Church in educating its members on morality so that there is utter corruption and immorality in many Catholic countries in the South? (18) Have they rejected the Sola Fide [=righteous by faith alone] teaching and accepted the excommunication of Luther?

In the hierarchy of truth, which teachings and practices have they considered not binding to a Catholic? Have they been selective in their embrace of Catholic teachings and practices? It is my hope that I will get some reactions to the above. God bless you.

Joe Fuliga Th.D.

Carl Braaten's Jeremiad: ELCA is Just Another Liberal Protestant Denomination

Colleagues,

The ELCA's national assembly a week ago produced no explosions. On the hot-potato sexuality issue the delegates voted for the status quo. A fortnight or so before the assembly, veteran ELCA theology prof Carl Braaten published an open letter to the ELCA national bishop. This hot-potato was one of his sub-texts. The core caveat in Carl's public letter was that the ELCA was becoming (probably had already become) "just another liberal American Protestant denomination." And what was the bishop going to do about it?

Since then 2 (yes, only two!) of you have asked: What do you think of Braaten's letter to bishop Mark Hanson?

Well, Carl didn't send it to me, and I wasn't in the loop of those who received it. But the two of you put hard copies (4 pages) into my hands. So I did read it and afterwards did think some thoughts. For summer's end, here they are.

First of all, a summary of Braaten's open letter—if you've had no access to the text.

Paragraph #'s

1. There is a serious brain drain, so many good guy theologians are abandoning the ELCA— jumping ship to the

Roman Catholic Church [RCC] and to the Orthodox Church of America [OCA]. Why?

2. Here are the names: Jaroslav Pelikan, Bob Wilken, Jay Rochelle, Len Klein, Bruce Marshall, David Fagerberg, Reinhard Huetter, Mickey Mattox Why do they leave? Why? Why? Why? Is there a message? Who has ears to hear?
3. Here's why. It's the PULL of orthodox teaching in these churches plus the PUSH of the ELCA, which "has become just another liberal protestant denomination." The ELCA is no longer "e" or "c" or "o," (evangelical, catholic, orthodox = Carl's key adjectives for genuine Christian theology) which was "the heart of Luther's reformatory teaching and the Luth. Conf. Writings." The RCC is now more hospitable to confessional Lutheran teaching than the ELCA is.
4. I can't do what they've done, re-invent myself. From my Madagascar missionary-kid roots, my 5-decade "long paper trail" – I'm an heir to the Luth. confessing movement. Liberal protestantism is heresy. ELCA is there. But I'm not about to cut and run. There is no place I know of where to go. The kind of Lutheranism I learned—from pious missionary parents and from the great 20th century Lutheran theologians I name here (a dozen of them)—is "near extinction" in the ELCA. There is no evidence to the contrary in what comes from the many voices and sources who speak for the ELCA. "Pious piffle...the aroma of an empty bottle" is all that remains. These good guys (all friends/colleagues of mine) left for this reason: ELCA is just another liberal protestant denomination. They are not stupid, nor rash, but serious Christians. And it ought to concern you immensely, as well as other ELCA leaders. Or are y'all saying "good riddance?"
5. I read all your episcopal letters. They too are no different from those coming from liberal protestant leaders of other American denominations. Sure, they are

left-leaning politically. So am I. Here's my track record. But all that doesn't equal "transforming Lutheranism into a liberal protestant denomination in doctrine, worship, and morality."

6. Similar thing has happened with DIALOG, the magazine some of us Luther Seminary profs founded in 1961—to get midwest Lutherans into the world-wide orbit of Lutheran theology—and eventually “e” and “c” and “o.” We edited it for 30 years, then resigned and started PRO ECCLESIA with its commitment to the “Great Tradition’ of e, c, & o. Since then DIALOG has become the “very opposite of what we intended,” nothing seriously Lutheran, the aroma of an empty bottle. Even worse, the mouthpiece of the denominational bureaucracy.
7. Some future historian will try “to explain how this self-destruction of conf. orthodox Lutheranism came about.” You, Mark, spoke recently about the hoped-for day when RCs and Lutherans commune together. Unlikely. Despite the Joint Declaration of the Doctrine of Justification (between Lutherans and Rome), the confessional chasm widens as we “embark on a trajectory that leads to rank antinomianism.”
8. I won't leave, but persons and congregations are talking of schism. They will do something since apostasy is on the horizon. It's all about “taking Scriptures seriously.” That has been the mantra of “every orthodox theologian of the Great Tradition.” We'll soon find out—if the ELCA takes the Scripture seriously. [Carl is referring to the homosexuality issue and the August assembly of the ELCA.] “Whoever passes the issue off as simply a hermeneutical squabble is not being honest.” That's ecclesiastical anarchy, sometimes called pluralism. To each his own. [Carl also says it in (somewhat fractured?) French: Chacun son gout! I think the phrase is: Chacun \$ son gout!]

9. I'm sorry it has come to this situation in the church, where I—as well as many pastor/missionaries in my extended family—have served for whole lifetimes. I speak for them too in saying that this church . . . is not remaining faithful to the kind of promises they made upon their ordination.
10. Is there a remedy? Are we at the point of no return? Apparently.
11. One day we will have to answer before the judgment seat of God. No one will be at our side to help. We all will have many things for which to repent. We all will cry: Lord, have mercy!

So far Carl's open letter to Bishop Mark Hanson.

Seems to me—

Para #1 & 2

1. Pelikan's move into Russian orthodoxy he recently described as this: "I thought it was about time that I became de jure what for ages I'd been de facto." So he represents no trend. I have not seen the "statements" of any of these other folks about their departures, if they made any. Did they leave the ELCA "because of the gospel," or as R.J. Neuhaus said at the time of his departure when he gave his apologia three years ago for swimming the Tiber: because he wanted an authoritative church, that was e and c and o, and that had the backbone to say: "In matters of doctrine and ethics—this is right, that wrong." It is clear that the Bishop of Rome does that. At that time ThTh devoted two postings to RJN's statement [archived on the Crossings website—www.crossings.org—May 2 and 9, 2002]. To me it signalled that "Mother-Missouri

Synod” might still be RJN’s genetic markers, and a “big” and “really catholic” authority figure for what is right and wrong was just irresistible. He did not claim that there was a “better” Gospel in Rome. That is the marker for “Augsburg catholics” for where the church is or isn’t. So I wonder if the dear departed whom Carl laments made any mention of churchly authority being normed by the Gospel [Aug. Cong. 28], as a reason for their departures. I have my hunches.

Carl asks: “What is the message here from these departures?” I wonder. It is not at all clear. Carl does not say that it is theology and church life being normed “according to THE gospel.” But if that were what they said, then it seems to me that they’re wearing blinders if they find Rome to be home. Significant is the fact that Carl never uses the “Gospel-dipstick” for his critique. Even more telling, the word “Gospel” appears nowhere in his four-page letter.

3. The ELCA is a liberal protestant denomination. Sure, it’s true. Agonizing, yes. But why should a “senior citizen” theologian be so surprised, so vexed? One reason for Carl, I suspect, is that he was a major voice in the formation of the ELCA. It was designed to be better—more Lutheran, for sure—than it has become. What happened? My question: Why have faith in any denomination’s orthodoxy? Didn’t we ex-Missouri Synod ELCA members learn that a generation ago? Didn’t Carl learn that in the imperfect old Norwegian and subsequent denominations that he grew up in? Denominations are an American invention in church history, only in the last couple hundred years of the church’s 2000-yr history. Most American Christians seem not to be aware of that, though others in the world Christian communion know that. American denominations have always

been a mixed bag. As is the ELCA today. And denominations, so say the experts, are now passing away.

I think it is safe to say that there are NO New Testament rubrics for how to run a denomination. No wonder they yin and yang, and may well be collapsing after a century or two.

Granted, what follows is ad hominem, but still I wonder. Does Carl's lament about the ELCA signal a chromosome passed on from his Norwegian pietism that a "pure" church is possible? "Ecclesiola in ecclesiae" was the motto we learned in seminary for Pietism's sense of church, namely, "a smallish pure church within the larger mixed-bag denomination or territorial church." I wonder.

4. "Pious missionary parents." Is that a clue for a pietist gene? Carl's yardstick for OK-ness is "e" and "c" and "o," evangelical, catholic and orthodox. But as Luther was wont to ask: What does that mean? What constitutes e and c and o? In Carl's letter to Hanson we don't learn that. Perhaps he thinks "everybody knows." I doubt it. Another of his markers is the "Great Tradition." Yet here too, who says what that tradition is and who—especially today—is in it? The 16th cent. Reformation was precisely a controversy about that "great tradition"—and there were divergent answers. If the Great Tradition is THE Gospel, then some of today's Roman theology is still elsewhere. Witness the indulgences granted during the Pope's recent visit to Cologne. And that is also true for the ELCA. Some of its sectors are elsewhere. But not all.
5. That's what they're also arguing about in the LCMS (possibly now a "conservative" mainline protestant denomination at the other end of the spectrum from the ELCA's alleged liberal generic protestantism). Where is the Great Tradition to be found across the whole spectrum

of American denominations? Both inside and outside American Lutheranism—and inside and outside Rome—you can find a variety of alternatives to Augsburg's claim (and confession) of that great tradition. So in which one(s) can you find THE great tradition?

6. Does Carl notice how telling this is? So it seems to me. He and his buddies didn't succeed in keeping DIALOG, their own baby, in the e & c & o of the Great Tradition. I.e., they failed. So what concrete counsel does he have to help Bishop Hanson shape up the big ELCA when they failed to do it with "little" DIALOG? He doesn't offer any. Seems more like: "Somebody's got to do something, and you, bishop, are the guy in charge." But what clout do bishops really have—even the bishop of Rome—for keeping the troops in line? Augsburg Art. 28 answers that question in terms of "bishops according to the gospel." It claims that coercion won't work, but other resources will. Too bad Carl doesn't tap that to give his own bishop some counsel.
7. "Rank antinomianism." That's the burr that really scratches, I betcha. It was the upcoming ELCA Orlando Assembly and the homophile hassle that vexes Carl. Is that also true for most, or all, of the dear departed? I wonder. That surfaces again with Carl's "glib" statement about hermeneutics—and "taking the Bible seriously." "Taking the Bible seriously" has been a mantra for the ELCA's "anti" folks on the homophile issue. Carl even cites Pannenberg hyping it. But it has more ancient roots as well, as a classical Pietist axiom: "Just read the Bible for what it says!"
8. "Whoever passes the issue [homosexuality] off as simply a hermeneutical squabble is not being honest." Sorry, Carl, it IS hermeneutics. And if you are the Lutheran theologian that you claim to be, you should not have made this utterance. Nor should you have said "passes off." You may

be PO'd, but hermeneutics is no "pass off" item. The Reformation earthquake was epi-centered in Biblical hermeneutics. So claims Melanchthon in the opening paragraphs of Apology Art. 4. So does Luther all over the place. In our ELCA hassle it is NOT old-fashioned vs. hist.critical-liberal, but law/promise LUTHERAN hermeneutics vs. Pietist "Just read the Bible for what it says!" Both the traditionalists and the revisionists in the ELCA are regularly arguing their cases from "just take the Bible for what it says," both implicitly claiming that hermeneutics is no big deal. Bob Bertram's classic axiom is true: "Biblical hermeneutics is at no point separate from Biblical soteriology." How you read the Bible is always connected to how you think folks get saved. Pietist soteriology is different from the Augsburg Aha! about the matter. Someone (and you COULD do it) needs to tell the pietists in the ELCA—both left and right—that their mostly Biblicist hermeneutics is linked to a less-than-Biblical soteriology. "Taking the Bible seriously" is no criterion for anything. Jesus was crucified for NOT taking the Bible seriously in terms of Rabbinic hermeneutics! And Jesus said the same about them, using his own (law-promise?) hermeneutics: He cites the Hebrew scriptures and says "go, and learn what this means...."

9. "The kind of promises made upon their ordination." Yup. What was that promise? When it happened to me, here's what I thought I was promising: To read the Bible (norma normans = the norm that norms everything) using the hermeneutical "norm" of the Augsburg Confession (a norma normata = a norm that is itself normed by the Gospel). Classical pietists don't do that. It's hard for me to see that Carl is doing that either.
10. "Is there a remedy? Are we at the point of no return?" Carl's proposes no remedy. Could be that if they

couldn't save DIALOG, he too is helpless to save a denomination that was supposed to be "e and c and o" from becoming just another Protestant entity.. But he wishes Mark would work a miracle.

11. "One day we will have to answer before the judgment seat of God. No one will be at our side to help." I hope Carl doesn't really believe that last sentence. If so, someone needs to tell him (in advance!) to lean on his scar-marked Defense Attorney standing at the judge's right hand. Or is this a slice of a pietist version of Judgment Day where the verdict is rendered according to one's faith, of course—but also a tad according to works?

Doubtless Carl memorized this chorale verse in his pious Norwegian Lutheran family home, as did I in my German version of the same. He—and all of us—need to sing it to each other:

"Trust not in [church] princes [nor denominations], they are but mortal.

Earthborn they are and soon decay.

Vain are their counsels at life's last portal,

When the dark grave engulfs its prey.

Since mortals can no help afford,

Place all your trust in Christ, our Lord.

Hallelujah! Hallelujah!"

There is indeed Someone "at our side to help." Also for the ELCA.

Carl mentions a "paper trail" of his half-century of publications—some of which I've read, but not all. From what I remember of that trail he's regularly been a spokesman for that trustworthy Someone. Some one of us needs to tell him.

Peace and Joy!

Walter R. Bouman, R.I.P. “God’s Yes and God’s No”

Colleagues,

Walt Bouman died yesterday, August 17, at his home in Columbus, Ohio. That day was Walt and Jan (Gundermann) Bouman’s 48th wedding anniversary. To his diagnosis 6 months ago, “inoperable cancer,” he and Jan responded with home hospice health care. Walt’s 76th birthday anniversary was July 9. We posted his last sermon at Trinity Seminary in Columbus – where he “crossed” his imminent death with the Gospel – on June 2 , 2005. If interested, you will find it archived in the ThTh listings on the Crossings website <www.crossings.org>

One of Walt’s classic pieces from 35 years ago (1970) is “Yes and No in a Taxicab.” It was a major item way back then in the collected essays of “THE PROMISING TRADITION, A Seminex Reader in Systematic Theology.” It was assigned reading for every incoming Seminex student. We pass it on to you on this day after his departure as a tribute to Walt.

There were giants in the earth in earlier days, says Genesis 6:4. Encountering Walt’s large frame, his impassioned prose (regularly peppered with holy(?) humor–“A man’s best friend is his dogma”–and then followed by his own ebullient laughter), his free-wheeling gestures and riveting eyes, you knew that the age of giants had not passed. Yet he has, though his works and words

are still with us. For him and them Te Deum laudamus!

Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

YES AND NO IN A TAXICAB by Walter R. Bouman

[This dialogue took place aproximately as described. Imagine a clergyman getting into a taxicab. The driver throws the first words over his shoulder in the direction of the clerical collar he glimpsed when the clergyman got into the cab.]

Driver: Where to?

Clergyman: Airport, please.

D: You a priest or something?

C: I'm a Lutheran pastor.

D: That so? I used to go to a Lutheran church. St. Paul's on the north side. Pastor X baptized my kids. Know him?

C: Yes, I do.

D: Yeah? I liked him a lot, but I don't go much any more. (Pause) You know, I got a theory about religion. ALL RELIGIONS ARE OKAY IF YOU PRACTICE THEM.

C: (Not interested) That so?

D: Yeah! Every religion is good so long as you put it into practice.

C: (Suddenly deciding to take the conversation seriously) Could I test your theory?

D: Sure, go ahead. Always like to talk about religion.

C: What would you say about Hitler and Nazism? Was that a good religion?

D: (Surprised) That wasn't no religion!

C: But it had many of the characteristics of a religion – rituals, doctrines, heretics. Most important, Hitler demanded and got total loyalty and unquestioning obedience. The institutions of Nazism replaced those of Christianity almost item by item. What does that do to your theory that every religion is good so long as you put it into practice?

D: Well, you sure got a crazy definition of religion!

C: How so?

D: Well, I always think of religion as, well, you know, churches and praying and preaching and that stuff.

C: And if you don't go to church you're not very religious?

D: Well, you know, like I said, I sorta got away from it.

C: Maybe you did. Or maybe you just got away from a churchly kind of religion. And maybe religion could include a lot more than church. For example, what are you loyal to? What do you care about?

D: Lots of things – like bowling. I sure like to bowl, twice a week. Pretty good average, too. 169. You bowl?

C: A little. But is bowling the most important thing in the world for you? Does it have your highest loyalty? Would you do

ANYTHING to bowl?

D: No, guess not. It's not important like that.

C: What is?

D: I guess – well, my kids, maybe. They're pretty important. Even got me to go to church for a while – you know, St. Paul's. That's how much I'd do for them! One's in college now. That's why I drive a cab a couple a nights a week – and weekends. I need the money for the kids – though I got a good enough regular job – at McDonnell's, right out where we're going.

C: You'd do anything for your kids?

D: I guess so. Anything. My boy – the one in college, you know – studying engineering – he'll be drafted when he's done. Another year. Way it looks, he'll probably go to Viet Nam. I think I'd go for him if I could. I was in the last war, you know. Germany.

C: That so?

D: Yeah. Guess I'd do anything. Wife says I care too much. But what else a man got to live for. No, take my kids away and I don't care anymore.

C: Sounds like that's your religion.

D: I thought you were gonna say that. I sorta knew what you were driving at way back when you asked what I cared about. Tried to change the subject 'cause I know what you're gonna say. You're gonna say I worship my kids – just like the wife says.

C: Well do you?

D: Aw right. Lemme tell you. Yeah! I do. And it bothers me. I

used to go into their rooms at night when they were little – and they'd be sleeping – and I 'd love them so much I could just feel it. And I knew I couldn't stand to have them suffer, and when they were sick it was worse on me than it was on them. I knew if one of 'em died it would be awful. I knew I couldn't stand it. I would even pray once in a while, that God wouldn't let 'em die. I thought going to church might help. But then there didn't really seem to be a God. "Scuse me, reverend. I don't mean to insult you.

C: That's OK. Go ahead.

D: Finally it just seemed useless, all that singing and praying and sitting and standing. Mind you, I'm not against religion. God for the kids to get some starch into their lives, something to keep 'em straight.

But I knew that if something was going to happen to 'em, it would. Nothing I could do. So what the hell – 'scuse me, reverend. You got me going here. I went to church often enough to please 'em till I got this weekend taxi job. They knew I was working for them. Keep 'em safe. Keep 'em straight. Give 'em a good education. That's all I can do. Till they get drafted and get sent to Viet Nam. And get shot to hell. And me with 'em. I know that's the way it will be. And I don't know what to do. What do I do? And don't tell me to believe in God. That don't work. I tried.

C: I'm not going to talk to you about God; but we can talk about religion because you HAVE a religion, and you're practicing it right now. Driving this cab. You don't have to believe there IS a God because you already have a god: your kids. I could say even more. You use your kids to justify your life. That's what keeps you working and living.

D: Well, what's wrong with that?

C: Why don't you tell me?

D: Oh hell! Don't play games with me.

C: I'm not; really, I'm not. I think you already told me what's wrong.

D: When?

C: When you talked about how you loved your kids and ended up thinking of one of them dead, maybe in a war, and you not able to do anything about it.

D: I still don't get it.

C: Look, the point you yourself are making is that you have a god, something that says YES to you, something that justifies your existence. Everybody who goes on living has made or found that kind of YES for life. That's why Camus...

D: Who?

C: Camus, Albert Camus.

D: Never heard of him.

C: That's all right. The point is, he said that suicide was the only important philosophical problem. If we go on living it's because we have a god, a YES, something that affirms us.

The thing you are beginning to realize is that your YES isn't all that dependable. You can't count on your kids being what you've asked them to be, your "god." That's the trouble with all our religions, all our "gods," all our causes and affirmations. They are not God. They are not able to be what we make them. We have to work overtime to pump "life" into our "gods." That's what enslaves us, finally. Our home-made gods always demand more than they can deliver.

D: But my kids are good to me. Couldn't ask for more.

C: Sure they are. But they can't be the whole ball of wax. And they won't be either. It's not just Viet Nam. They grow up, marry, move away from home. They need us less and less.

D: Yeah, that's happening already.

C: Besides, none of us ever succeeds in justifying our lives – even if our “gods” outlast us. Death says a final NO to everyone of us.

D: Wait a minute! I don't look at death like that. It's just, when your number is up, you've bought it.

C: I'm not talking about how we look at death; I'm talking about the fact of death. Some people are saying that “God is dead.” It may really be that death is God, that death is the inescapable verdict upon each of us.

D: You make it sound like I'm guilty of something. But I don't feel guilty. Nothing wrong with loving your kids.

C: Right – not if that's all you're doing. But if loving them is the way you justify what you are and what you do, then you are already living an evaluated life. And then death, too, is an evaluation. It says NO.

D: That's pretty hard to take. I didn't ask to be born. I didn't ask to be made this way.

C: That's part of my point. When we can't justify ourselves, we can always try to blame something, or someone, or the system itself. Anything to make sure that we are never in the wrong.

D: Say, aren't you preachers supposed to comfort people? None of this sounds very comforting.

C: Well, we started talking about religion, remember? Trying to test your theory that all religions are good as long as you practice them. I've tried to say that we all have a religion, a way of getting a YES for life, a way of not being in the wrong. And it seems to me that our religions really fail us, that we are betrayed by our religions into deceiving ourselves and blaming others. The verdict on that kind of living is death.

D: But you didn't say anything about God.

C: You said you didn't want to be told about God. So we talked about life and failure and the verdict of death. That may be all the glimpse we get of God from life and history. And the God we see there is not some grandfatherly being who makes everything come out all right in the end. You yourself said that there didn't seem to be that kind of God anyway. The only God we're likely to meet if we look for one in life and history is the God that says NO to life and history.

D: But aren't you supposed to tell us a way out?

C: I don't think so. Whatever else I might have to say, it's not a way out. Christianity is not some cheap escape from the way things are. You can invent an escape if you want, but it won't take you anywhere. You can even try to make the Christian Gospel into some kind of escape, but that's as much an invented religion as any other – and just as much a failure.

D: Well, what is Jesus supposed to do?

C: He doesn't let us off. He just lets us IN on Himself, on what He is and on what He does. He is YES to us, and He asks us to believe that and to give up our other "gods" and justifications. His best known stories were about Himself, because he was accused of saying YES to people who didn't have much going for them socially or morally or religiously – whores

and traitors. He told about a son who took his inheritance and left home...

D: Yeah, yeah, I know. "Prodigal son." Right?

C: The point of the story is that Jesus is a different way of dealing with rejected people. We might call it "forgiveness," but it does not come cheap. Jesus' death is His final and total commitment to us. It is the way He experiences the verdict, lets it happen to him, our home-made religions and our illusory justifications.

The boy in Jesus' story gets that kind of YES which sets him free to admit that he is in the wrong. We are given that YES in Jesus which sets us free to say NO to our religions, even to join in the verdict upon them because the YES is stronger than the verdict, because when the verdict has done its worst, the YES overcomes it.

D: I never heard it that way before.

C: But that's what Christians mean by "Gospel." To believe that Gospel means to entrust ourselves to the YES in Jesus, to hold to that YES against the NO of life in history. To believe Jesus is to be free for all the things in the world out of which we want to make gods – for bowling and kids and work and the wife. We are really free FOR them because we don't need any longer to try to make them what they can't be: our "gods." We're not trapped into working them up into something "divine." We're free to be FOR them as Jesus is FOR us.

D: Well, where does church and praying fit into all this?

C: It helps if we stop thinking first that church is a building or a religious organization. Church is really what happens to people when the Gospel is happening to them and through them to

other people. The words that Christians share with one another about Jesus as God the forgiver are meant to set them free for one another and for all people.

D: Doesn't sound like any church I know.

C: Maybe we all have to ask where this is really going on. It's true that a lot of religious action going on under the name of church is only a cover-up for our old home-made religions. A German play written right after World War II is about a man who comes back from the war and finds himself betrayed by everything. The church is a character called "god" in the play. The character keeps repeating, 'Nobody cares about me anymore.' That's what a lot of "churches" ask for – that people care about them. But the author shouts, "Hasn't God studied theology? Who is supposed to care about whom?"

When the church cares about itself and worries about whether people care about it, then that's a sure sign that the Gospel is being missed somewhere. The Gospel sets people free from wondering who cares about them, sets them free for caring.

D: You mean even church religions aren't all right when you practice them?

C: I'm saying that churches and doctrines and even the Bible can be misused so that they become "gods" and false gospels. Right religion is where Jesus' affirmation is being heard and trusted and celebrated so that people are free for each other. Wrong religion is not trusting the Gospel that is in Jesus – and that kind of religion can be going on in the middle of churches.

D: Does praying do any good?

C: Like everything else, that depends on whether praying grows

out of trusting the good news in Jesus. When you believe the good news, you can hold your whole life and people in it, your world and its destiny, before God. Praying then means getting to be a “son of God” like Jesus, that is, knowing and trusting and saying thanks for the YES that sets you free. Then you will recognize God’s YES elsewhere in the world, and you will look for ways to be part of the YES in the world . . . This the airport?

D: Yeah.

C: Here. Keep the change.

D: Thanks. If you ever see Pastor X, tell him hello.

C: But I didn’t get your name.

D: That’s all right. Just tell him about me. He’ll know.