

Walter R. Bouman's Sermon: "The Foolishness of the Gospel is our Wisdom"

Colleagues,

Walt Bouman and I were seminary classmates in St. Louis 55 years ago. Our lives have been linked ever since. E.g., he nudged Marie and me into meeting each other. [You've both got the same sense of humor, he said. You "deserve" each other.] After seminary it was grad school for both of us in Germany (he on his Fullbright in Heidelberg, I petticoating on Marie's Fullbright in Hamburg) along with student high jinks thereunto appertaining. Example: a 1956 Bouman-organized summer holiday adventure with 3 other St. Louis grads studying in Germany, that took us to the Taize community, Ronchamps, Gruenewald's Isenheim Altar, Strassburg, Salzburg, climbing an Alp or two in Switzerland (even a walk "inside" the Rhone glacier), Mad King Ludwig's Bavarian castles, Passau to pick up a harpsichord—yes!—that Walt had bought, which then we finessed it into our VW Microbus along with the 6 of us Missouri-Synners! The last gasp was winding up at the Bayreuth Festival for all four operas of Wagner's Ring. Ah, frivolous youth. But we did finally get our degrees. During the Wars of Missouri in the seventies we were co-confessors on the ramparts, and have been tweaking each other through all these years for the best way to articulate a Catholicism of the Augsburg Confession, wherein we probably carry on the debate of our major mentors from those ancient days in Germany—Walt with Edmund Schlink and I with Werner Elert.

Two months ago Walt's far-advanced cancer was discovered during a surgery. He has opted for no therapeutic intervention. He crosses that cancer with the Gospel in his sermon below,

preached 2 weeks ago at the chapel of Trinity Lutheran Seminary in Columbus Ohio, his workplace for decades. Trinity has a consortium connection with Bexley Hall, an Episcopalian seminary located on the same campus. On the day that Walt preached it was Bexley Hall's turn. The liturgy was "in the Anglican tradition."

Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

May 18, 2005

The Holy Eucharist

My thanks to Bexley Hall for the invitation to preach today. It is appropriate because my [Episcopal] colleague Bill Petersen and I worked together on Lutheran-Episcopal Dialogue III and there first dreamed of a relationship between Bexley Hall and Trinity Seminary. My thanks to all of you for your prayers and greetings, your visits and your care, your love and support. I am sustained by the Gospel and the Eucharist.

(An aside: My pastor, Al Debelak, came to share communion in the hospital. He had the prayers and a lesson, and the great thanksgiving. My roommate had a large, noisy, extended family. And when the first of his family visitors arrived, he said: "Do you know what? They had a mass at the next bed! Isn't that right?" he asked me. I said, "Yes." Then he said, "What are you?" I replied, "A Lutheran." "What are Lutherans?" he asked. "Reformed Catholics," I said. And then as each new family member arrived, he repeated, "They had a mass at the next bed. My roommate is a Lutheran, and they're Reformed Catholics!")

Jan and I are also sustained by the seminary community in its

broadest sense. Thank you.

Of course I have turned to some of my favorite jokes about death. Woody Allen: "It is impossible to experience your own death objectively and still carry a tune." "Some things are worse than death. Have you ever spent two hours with an insurance salesman?" Johnny Carson is my favorite so far: "It is true that for several days after you die, your hair and fingernails keep on growing, but the phone calls taper off."

I first thought of preaching on that important holy day this week, Syttende Mai. [= May 17, Norwegian Independence Day (from Sweden) in 1905] This is also the week of Pentecost, and then we are anticipating the dreaded Trinity Sunday. Before I discovered that the Trinity is the story we tell of God because of the gospel, I thought that I was preaching the incomprehensible to the uncomprehending. But today I want to direct our attention to another word from Scripture, some verses from Psalm 90. The days of our life are seventy years, and perhaps eighty, if we are strong; even then their span is only toil and trouble; they are soon gone, and we fly away. ... So teach us to count our days that we may gain a wise heart. Psalm 90, vs. 10 and 12.

I'm counting. I'm counting. It took a blow to the head with a two-by-four to get my attention. But I'm counting. The oncologist told me I have six to nine months. When do I start counting, I asked him, April 1 or May 1? That's a quibble, he replied. So I haven't exactly begun a countdown. You know, 180 minus 1 and counting. But I am aware that each day is a gift, to be treasured and savored. I am listening to the classical music on WOSU-FM a lot these days. Just listening. Hearing new music, and new things in familiar music. I have been thinking that I could happily spend a lot of eternity just listening to music. Bach, above all.

When I first returned home from the hospital I prayed each night that God would not let me wake up in this world. But then Anna Madsen sent me an e-mail saying, "Don't you dare die until I get to Columbus." When Anna talks, even God listens. So I stopped praying the prayer. Instead I have turned to a prayer that I first prayed in German as a child. "Breit aus die Flügel beide, O Jesu meine Freude, und nimm dein Küchlein ein." My own rough translation is

"Spread out both of your wings, Oh Jesus, my Joy, and gather in your little cupcake."

Hard now to think of myself as a "little cupcake," so I pray the English translation instead:

Lord Jesus, who does love me,
Oh spread thy wings above me,
And shield me from alarm.
Though evil would assail me
Thy mercy will not fail me.
I rest in thy protecting arm.

But I'm counting.

The purpose for the counting is not like sitting on death row. It is to gain a wise heart, or in an older translation, that "we may apply our hearts unto wisdom." I have been thinking much about what wisdom I have gained, what is of such importance that it must be shared with you today. I have come up with four essentials. I tried to make it a Lutheran three, but these four seemed irreducible.

I. The first is God's own foolishness, which is wiser than our wisdom. Who could have imagined that Jesus, the crucified Jew, is the Messiah of Israel and the world. He

is identified as Messiah by his resurrection from the dead. The gospel is not an idea, for example, that God loves us, although that is true. The gospel is good news, it is the announcement that something good and absolutely decisive for the universe has happened. The Christian good news is simply: Jesus is risen! That is good news because it means that death no longer has power over him. Jesus, not death, will have the last word. But the resurrection of Jesus was not personal vindication. He has become the first fruits of all that sleep. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ shall all be made alive. He will reign until he has put all things under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death. And then God will be everything in everyone. (I Cor. 15:22-28)

Note that this is a vision for the future and it beckons us to follow it. Of course Jesus is also about the past, our past, the world's past. There on the cross he takes sin and evil and death into God's own being and history, where it is overcome forever. But the gospel is first and foremost a vision for the future. Because Jesus is risen, everything has changed radically. We are set free from serving the powers of death with our lives, our fears, our policies. We are set free from having to protect ourselves at whatever cost to others. We are set free from the dreadful necessity to grab all the gusto we can because we only go around once. We are set free from the compulsion to cling to every day and hour of life in this world.

Note also that this vision applies to everyone. Paul says "all" repeatedly, and I take it that he means "all." Robert Farrar Capon taught me some years ago that Jesus did not come to repair the repairable, correct the correctable, improve the improvable. He came to raise the

dead! The only final condition for eternal participation in Christ's victory is that we be dead, 100% gold-plated dead! Paul exults in God's universal forgiveness. "For God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may be merciful to all." (Romans 11:32) It is God's unconditional love that evokes his outburst of praise: "O the depths of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God. How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable are his ways." (Romans 11:33)

We really have trouble getting it. Ann Lamott quotes the pastor of "The Church of 80% Sincerity:" We are capable of unconditional love, but it has a shelf life of about 8 to 10 seconds. "We might say to our beloved, 'Darling, I'll love you unconditionally until the very end of dinner.'" It is God's eternal unconditional love that distinguishes God from us (Hosea 11:8-9), and not God's infinity or presumed immortality. Difficult as it is (because I always think of it as unfair), I have come to accept God's universal salvation as the final consequence of the resurrection of Jesus. I think of all: the best and worst, the innocent and the guilty, the victims of the holocaust and the evil perpetrators, those killed in all of our senseless wars, and the misguided leaders who send them into battle. Christ will raise us all, and somehow bend us into shape so that in eternity we become the human beings we were intended to be.

II. Because Christ is risen, because the messianic age has come, Christ's messianic people are identified by our participation in the messianic banquet. Nothing has changed so much in my lifetime as the church's understanding of the Eucharist. In my youth the Eucharist was a penitential ritual, associated with repentance and forgiveness, with confession and absolution. Of course,

we are set free to repent by God's unsearchable forgiveness. But as we have begun to recover our roots in Judaism, we have discovered that because the messianic age is here, we are already at the messiah's feast (Isaiah 25:6-9). This is the feast of victory for our God. Well, it is only hors d'oeuvres on this side of the grave, but it is already a foretaste of the feast to come. This is what identifies us as Messiah's people. When I graduated from seminary 51 years ago, I don't think there were 100 Lutheran parishes that had weekly Eucharist. Now there are many thousands, and the number grows apace.

So, in Gordon Lathrop's wonderful insight, you are ordained to be table waiters. That is what it means to serve. Ordained ministry is not about meeting people's needs, although that is a dimension of the whole church's ministry to the Reign of God. Still less is it about accommodating people's bondage to the powers of death so that we can keep our jobs. Ordained ministry is quite simply that we wait on table, where Christ is already embracing us with his victory, and eating and drinking new with us in the Father's kingdom (Matt. 26:29).

The Eucharist also gives us our mission. For what is present to us in this meal is nothing less than Christ's offering of himself for the world. In the meal he takes us up into his offering and makes us his body for the world. In the Eucharist we experience that there is more to do with our lives than to protect them. We are set free to offer them. We pray: "We offer with joy and thanksgiving what you have first given us: ourselves, our time, and our possessions." Only Christ can make such a total claim upon us, and only Christ can set us free for such a total offering. So we are free to gather as the

church made visible at the table and then free to be sent as the church scattered in total service to the reign of God.

III. Because Christ is risen, we are free to love the church. I don't mean the church that gives us warm fuzzies, that embraces us with comfort and love. I mean the real church, the church that fills us with dismay, that robs us of hope, that pursues agendas so contrary to the mind of Christ that we want to despair. That's the church we are free to love. The church that elects a pope who seems unwilling to address the urgent issues facing church and world. The church in Kansas that seems determined to pit Genesis against evolution instead of recognizing that a literalistic interpretation of Genesis has little to do with the origins and meanings of the traditions in Genesis and the place of creation theology in the proclamation of the gospel. The church that is the ELCA threatening to tear itself apart over the issue of blessing same-sex unions, an issue that is not the gospel which constitutes and unites the church. That is the church which Jesus' resurrection frees you to love.

You are free to imprint on your hearts and minds the great apostolic words from Ephesians 4: "I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, putting up with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." In the last chapter of Luke's Gospel Jesus tells the disciple community to await being "clothed with power from on high." We do not need to be "clothed with power from on high" to join a bridge club, root for the Buckeyes, golf with our friends, or champion causes with other like-

*mind*ed people.

But we need “power from on high” to be the church, that is, to be so grasped by Christ that we can “put up with each other” in “a community that can sustain its unity in the midst of disagreement over emotionally charged issues, without demonizing or disregarding, excluding or humiliating each other.” (Faithful Conversation, Daniel Olson, page 102) Olson points out that our present situation gives the church a magnificent opportunity to be the church – to disagree profoundly over truly important matters without turning away from each other or turning against each other.

IV. The resurrection of Jesus frees us to love the world. I think of that great cosmic and mysterious universe set in motion by the creative urge of the Father, called into being through the creating Logos, given a life which is pointed toward a new heaven and a new earth by the aspiring Holy Spirit. But we are free to love a more manageable world, our own small planet placed into our care as stewards of God’s gift. Such love of our world was never more in need. I have noticed two insistent temptations in my illness. The first is an almost narcissistic fixation on myself and my body, noting every twinge and change, keeping my plumbing working, measuring what and how much I can eat. The second is an irrational twist on “Stop the world, I want to get off.” My cry, when I hear of plans for travel I will no longer be able to undertake, futures of which I will not be a part, is to shout, “Stop the world because I’m getting off.” What rescues me from both of these temptations is, in part, my longtime habit of watching the daily news, reading the daily paper, working my way through two news magazines, and keeping up with the affairs of the church

and the world.

A lot of what I read is appalling in terms of our care for this planet. Time magazine had a cover story on Ann Coulter a few weeks ago. In the article she was quoted as saying: "God gave us the earth. We have dominion over the plants, the animals, the seas. God said, 'Earth is yours. Take it. Rape it. It's yours.'" To which Peter Fenn, her Democratic counterpart on a Fox news broadcast responded: "We're Americans, so we should consume as much of the earth's resources as fast as we possibly can." To which Coulter replied, "Yes. Yes! As opposed to living like the Indians." Time, March 25, 2005, page 37) Coulter gets \$25,000 a speech for throwing this "red meat" to her right-wing audiences. No politician would dare to say such things, but the audiences love it. What we must do is look at the policies proposed and imposed by law and decree, the lack of concern for pollution and our consumption of fossil fuels. The World-watch Institute publishes an annual "State of the World" report. The goal of the World-watch Institute is for our generation to hand on to future generations a world undiminished in its capacity to sustain life.

We are not on the verge of Armageddon. We are not waiting for Christ to rapture us out of the world so that we can have a ring-side seat as the world is destroyed. We are called to be stewards, to hand on a world as we received it from our parents and grandparents.

We are called to love the world, to want clean air and water for everyone, to give ourselves into the service of peace instead of blindly following our leaders in senseless wars, to commit to the cause of justice especially where our institutions and our country are

guilty of injustice. That is a big order. But you are set free to pursue it by the resurrection of Christ, who has put an end to the dominion of death. We are free for the battle because the victory is already won.

So we come back to the beginning. My capacity for being a steward is limited and moving towards its end. Your capacity is still vibrant and active. But God continues to call all of us, even me counting my days, to be grasped by the great good news that Jesus is risen, to be taken up into Christ's offering in the meal, to be the church by putting up with each other in love, and to care for our world.

I am being readied for my final baptism, my last dying and rising with Christ. All my baptisms of dying and rising with Christ, from July 28, 1929 to the present moment, have prepared me for this time. I turn often to the hymn-prayer with which J.S. Bach concludes his magnificent Passion According to St. John. It is the final stanza of a hymn by Martin Schalling (1532-1608), No. 325 in the Lutheran Book of Worship. I ask you to join me in praying/singing that final stanza.

*Lord, let at last thine angels come,
To Abr'hams bosom bear me home,
That I may die unfearing;
And in its narrow chamber keep
My body safe in quiet sleep
Until thy reappearing.
And then from death awaken me,
That these mine eyes with joy may see,
O Son of God, thy glorious face,
My Savior and my fount of grace.
Lord Jesus Christ,
My prayer attend, my prayer attend,
And I will praise thee without end.*

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Walter R. Bouman

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THE LEGALISATION OF THE GOSPEL (Part II)

Colleagues,

Here is Part II of Joe Strelan's article. Strelan is a retired theology professor who taught many years at the seminary of the Lutheran Church in Australia. He wrote this article for the "Vic Pfitzner Festschrift" honoring the principal of the seminary, now recently retired as well. It will appear downunder in the Lutheran Theological Journal later this year. The LTJ has granted permission for Thursday Theology readers to get "a sneak preview." Last week's Part I (ThTh 362) presented Strelan's basic argument for the deadly consequences when the Gospel is "legalized." In this second half Strelan examines Rick Warren's recent best-seller, "The Purpose Driven Life" as a theological proposal that does just that. The final paragraph of last week's posting is repeated below to provide continuity for the Rick Warren case study.

Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

THE LEGALISATION OF THE GOSPEL (Part II)

If we mix justification by faith with love, good works, obedience, or discipleship, we are mixing law and gospel. We are legalising the gospel. And the results are predictable: Christ is not magnified and the troubled sinner is not comforted. When we oblige sinners to analyse their own love or lack of it, their own obedience or lack of it, their own good works or lack of them – and suggest that their continued blessed status before God depends on their imperfect performance, then we are pointing them to themselves, their own righteousness, and driving them back to the law. We are depriving them of the comfort they should have in the ‘pure’ gospel, that is, in the gospel which has not been legalised or mixed with law. As the Apology says: ‘If they are supposed to believe that they have a gracious God because they love and keep the law, they will have to doubt whether they have a gracious God’ (IV,301).

‘The Purpose Driven Life’

*I want to demonstrate that in this discussion I am not just resurrecting an ancient straw man, by referring to a book which is widely read and used in the English-speaking Lutheran church: Rick Warren’s *The Purpose Driven Life* (Zondervan, 2002). The title of the opening chapter of this book is ‘It All Starts with God’. Warren writes: ‘If you want to know why you were placed on this planet, you must begin with God. You were born by his purpose and for his purpose’ (17). And again: ‘It is only in God that we discover our origin, our identity, our meaning, our purpose, our significance, and our destiny. Every other path leads to a dead end’ (18).*

Warren emphasises the importance of knowing God’s purpose for

our lives and of living 'purpose-driven' lives. Living such lives has five great benefits, he says: Knowing your purpose

gives meaning to your life

simplifies your life

focuses your life

motivates your life

prepares you for eternity (30-32)

It all begins with God, and it's all for God, we are told (53). Who is this God with whom it all begins and exists? According to Warren, it is the God who created us for himself and for his glory. The God who saves sinners, not for their own sake, but for his own sake, so that he might be glorified and praised by the creatures he made and saved. God saves people to serve him: that is the purpose and goal of their existence. This God commands us 'to recognize his glory, honour his glory, declare his glory, praise his glory, reflect his glory, and live for his glory' (54; italics in original). And why should we do this? 'Because God deserves it! We owe him every honour we can possibly give... [L]iving for God's glory is the greatest achievement we can accomplish with our lives' (54,55).

This God who creates us for his own sake, saves us for his own sake, and demands impossible things of us is an awesome God, one to be feared, even to flee from. This God is not the God-for-us and the God-in-Christ of the gospel. This God is the God who dwells in glory, unapproachable, hidden from our view. The God who must be obeyed. The God who seems to value our obedience more than he values us. In his reading of God, Rick Warren owes much to Calvin and little to Luther.

'Surrender'

We must 'surrender' to this God, Warren writes. Indeed, 'the heart of worship is surrender' to God (77). Surrender is not an

odd word for Warren to use, given his image of God. Surrender speaks of submission and obedience. Not surprisingly, Warren writes that 'surrendering is best demonstrated in obedience...Surrendered people obey God's word, even if it doesn't make sense' (80). It is true, Warren goes on to say that '[a]nother aspect of a fully surrendered life is trust' (80). But he is not talking about faith or trust in God's promise of mercy and forgiveness in the crucified and risen Christ. He is talking about relying 'on God to work things out instead of trying to manipulate others, force your own agenda, and control the situation. You let go and let God work' (80,81).

The result of using 'surrender' language is that the relationship between us and God, between our actions and God's actions, is disturbingly distorted. To give two examples from *The Purpose Driven Life*: Warren insists that 'God chose Mary to be the mother of Jesus, not because she was talented and wealthy or beautiful, but because she was totally surrendered to him' (82). As evidence he quotes Mary's wondrous response to the angel's words: 'Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word' (Luke 1: 38). But these words bespeak Mary's trusting response to God's word, not God's motivation for choosing Mary. God chose Mary, not because of her surrendered life but because God in his mercy chooses earthen vessels, unworthy though they be, to be his instruments in the economy of salvation.

The second example: Warren relates that he asked Bill Bright, founder of Campus Crusade for Christ: 'Why did God use and bless your life so much?' Bright's answer:

When I was a young man, I made a contract with God. I literally wrote it out and signed my name at the bottom. It said, 'From this day forward, I am a slave of Jesus Christ' (84).

This again is an inversion of how things are in the Kingdom. Jesus says to all disciples: 'You didn't choose me. I chose you and sent you out to produce fruit, the kind of fruit that will last' (John 15:16). And the apostle Paul confessed: 'By the grace of God I am what I am' (1 Cor 15:10). Peter said: 'Lord don't come near me! I'm a sinner' (Luke 5:8). Yet Jesus pronounced the great 'Fear not'! and out of sheer grace called Peter to follow as a disciple. God blessed Bill Bright's work, not because Bright made a contract with God or 'surrendered' to God, but because God in his grace and mercy calls and uses the Bill Brights of this world to get the gospel of Jesus Christ out into the world, the gospel which is 'the power of God unto salvation to all who believe' (Rom 1:16).

Surrender is a 'law' word and it fosters 'law' thinking (I surrender and obey, and God chooses me or uses me). Surrender is not the language of the gospel. The gospel is promise or offer or invitation. You accept or trust a promise; you hold on to it or embrace it. You don't capitulate or surrender to a promise. The notion of surrender confuses law and gospel; it legalises the gospel.

Making God Smile

Cut from the same legalistic cloth is Warren's discussion in the chapter entitled 'What Makes God Smile?' He writes:

The smile of God is the goal of your life. Since pleasing God is the first purpose of your life, your most important task is to discover how to do that (69).

>From the example of Noah, Warren deduces 'the five acts of worship that make God smile'. God smiles when we love him supremely, trust him completely, obey him wholeheartedly, praise and thank him continually, and when we use our abilities. Warren concludes: 'What God looks at is the attitude

of your heart...Will you make pleasing God the goal of your life? There is nothing that God won't do for the person totally absorbed with this goal' (76).

Gerhard Forde, who abhors 'adverbial theology', would shudder at the adverbs (supremely, completely, wholeheartedly, continually, totally). By their adverbs ye shall know them. It is not enough to love God; it must be done supremely; it is not enough to trust God; it must be done completely, and so forth. Troubled sinners are driven to analyse and evaluate their love and trust and obedience and praise and commitment. What lack I yet? Where am I falling short? My love and trust is not what it should be. Conclusion: God does not and will not smile on me.

Once again, the distortion is deadly for the troubled conscience. The gospel announces: for Christ's sake, because of Christ, God forgives us, is merciful to us, smiles on us. Christians pray with the psalmist: 'Smile on us and save us' (Psalm 80:19). When God looks at us, he sees Christ and his righteousness – and he smiles on us. God's smile is the sun which brings to life in us the love and trust and obedience and praise and service of God which pleases him so. God sees what he has wrought in us, and pronounces it good, very good – and we continue to blossom in the warmth of his smile. The 'pure' gospel says: God smiles on us, and that smile enables us to love and trust and obey and serve him. The legalised 'gospel' says: when/if we do these things, then God smiles on us. This is a saddening exchange of law for gospel. It fails to magnify Christ and it fails to comfort troubled conscience.

Heavenly Rewards

In the faith+obedience model, rewards are important. Given the law hermeneutic which is at work in Warren's book, it is not unexpected that he uses the promise of heavenly rewards as a motivation for living the 'purpose-driven life'. Jesus stood at

a fork in the road. Would he fulfill his purpose and bring glory to God, or would he shrink back and live a comfortable, self-centred life? You face the same choice. Will you live for your own goals, comfort, and pleasure, or will you live the rest of your life for God's glory, knowing that he has promised eternal rewards? (57; cf 39,44,57).

The New Testament does speak of 'rewards' in heaven; so do the Lutheran Confessions. But three things need to be borne in mind: first, despite the word suggesting something earned, the New Testament insists that 'rewards' are gifts of God's grace. They are undeserved. Jesus said: 'When you have done all you should, then say, "We are merely servants, and we've simply done our duty"' (Luke 17:10) .

Secondly, motivating Christians to act appropriately towards the neighbour with an eye to rewards in heaven, is an affront to Christ. Is the heaven which Christ won for us not good enough? Is something lacking in Christ's work for us? Thirdly, a reward mentality puts the neighbour second in our concern. Our first question will be: which action will score the most brownie points before God? A healthy attitude to rewards is not to think of rewards at all, but to get on with loving the neighbour. Knowing that eternal life in its richness is ours, we can relax and focus on loving the neighbour. What we do for our neighbours is determined by their needs, not by what actions might score greater reward points.

The Neuralgic Point

Where has Warren gone wrong? What is the theological misstep at the heart of his unhappy book? I suggest that his problem is caused by his failure to understand and teach the centrality of the gospel, of Christ, of justification, not only at the start of the Christian walk, but during every moment and every step of that walk. We cannot live without forgiveness, without the

imputed righteousness of Christ. The extent to which we think we can escape that necessity is the extent to which we make room for our righteousness before God instead of Christ's righteousness.

The skeleton of the model with which Warren operates is this: my life as a Christian begins with God; I am responsible, with the help of the Holy Spirit, for continuing it and for bringing it to a successful conclusion. Faith is necessary to begin my Christian life; obedience is required if I am to continue it and complete it. The gospel converts me and brings me into a relationship with God; the law drives how I live and what I do in the new life. First the gospel, then the law. Justification is the beginning of my life before God, after that it ceases to be relevant for all practical purposes. It has no real dynamic in my life.

The skeleton of the model with which Lutherans operate (or should operate) is this: my life began in solidarity with Adam. I was 'dead in trespasses and sins', condemned under the law. My life as a Christian, however, begins in solidarity with Christ. Through him I have access in the Spirit to the Father (Eph 2:18). So my life begins, continues, and ends with and in the Triune God. 'Whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's.' (Rom 14:8). Trust in the promise of God's mercy and forgiveness makes my life as a Christian possible, and sustains my life as a Christian, even in the face of my many failures and acts of disobedience. 'The life I now live I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me' (Gal 2:20). Through the gospel, signed and spoken, the Holy Spirit brings me to faith and keeps me in the faith.

The law, however, is not a matter of faith (Gal 3:12). The law has to do with works. The law and my works have their proper place, namely, in the world of my neighbour. But not before

God. Never before God. Before God what matters, solely and exclusively, is Christ's work for me and my grasping him in faith. Justification is the beginning of my life before God, and an ongoing reality throughout my life; I cannot live without it. 'Those who through faith are righteous shall live' (Rom 1:17).

I take up just one of these statements, by way of elucidation of the Lutheran position. Justification is not merely a past event in the life of a Christian; justification is our continued relationship with God-in-Christ. Jesus Christ is always my mediator in the presence of the law, which always accuses me. Perhaps the place of justification in the life of a Christian is more clearly seen if we use its synonym: the forgiveness of sins. I live in forgiveness, just as I live in Christ and in the gospel (cf John 15:4,5). Without the daily assurance of forgiveness for Christ's sake my life in Christ would wither and die. Through the life-giving word and sacraments, God nourishes and sustains the reality and relationship expressed by the word 'justification'. Every moment my life is 'hidden with Christ in God' (Col 3:3).

What then of sanctification or the new obedience? The temptation to introduce at this point the law, or a legalised gospel, as a dynamic must be resisted at all costs. It is not the law but the 'pure' gospel which empowers and drives my life of love for my neighbour. It is not my knowledge of my purpose in life which drives my life (pace Warren), but my faith-knowledge of Christ crucified (Phil 3:7-11). When the old self dies to sin and the new is made alive to God in Christ (Rom 6:11), sanctification results.

Thus the ongoing dynamic of sanctification is justification by faith in Christ. The object of the sanctified life, this new obedience, is not God but my neighbour. Both justification and

sanctification are the Holy Spirit's work in me, from beginning to end of my life. Hence the same means by which God nourishes and sustains the reality of my justification also nourish and sustain my sanctification: the gospel in its various forms and modes (cf Smalcald Articles Part III, Art IV).

III

This essay is an appeal to Lutheran pastors, first, to be on their guard against turning the gospel into law; secondly, to strive to weed out of the church every vestige of a legalised gospel. And thirdly, to make preaching the pure, unmixed gospel their constant delight. At stake is the honour of Christ and the comfort of troubled sinners.

THE LEGALISATION OF THE GOSPEL (Part I)

Colleagues,

Another unsolicited serendipity on legalism and the Gospel! This one, like last week's from Anton Lutz in Papua New Guinea, came my way as another pleasant surprise. Its author is John Strelan ["Joe" to all who know him], retired prof at Australian Lutheran College, the seminary of the Lutheran Church in Australia. Way back in 1992 Joe, together with wife Bronwyn, was in our St. Louis living room "recruiting" me for a year as guest lecturer at the seminary. For the academic year 1994 (downunder the term begins in January and concludes in November) we were doing just that in Adelaide. From the opening lines of his article you'll see why Strelan and Schroeder were mucho simpatico. Strelan has been a major voice

for “the Augsburg Aha!” in Australia—both in the LCA and in ecumenical conversations. He’s done extended service in Papua New Guinea, one product of which was his classic publication on the theology of the “Cargo Cults” in Melanesian culture. He’s also had teaching stints in Germany (Erlangen and Neuendettelsau), and other venues (closer to home) in SE Asia. Strelan wrote this article for the “Vic Pfitzner Festschrift” honoring another dear friend, who was principal of the seminary in our time there. It will appear downunder in the “Lutheran Theological Journal” later this year. The LTJ editor, Peter Lockwood, has granted permission for Thursday Theology readers to get “a sneak preview.”

It will come to you in two parts. Part I is the basic essay. Part II (next week) uses Rick Warren’s THE PURPOSE DRIVEN LIFE as a case study of the Legalisation of the Gospel.

Peace & joy!

Ed Schroeder

THE LEGALISATION OF THE GOSPEL

John G Strelan

ALC Faculty Emeritus

[For forty-five years Victor Carl Pfitzner, my long-time friend and colleague, has delighted in proclaiming the gospel without ration cards and without strings attached.]

Friedemann Hebart, a former colleague of Dr Pfitzner, writes in his popular commentary on the Formula of Concord of those who ‘dare to state the gospel as though it were law’. They are preaching, he says, the ‘legal gospel’ (now there’s an oxymoron

if ever there was one!) Hebart cites several examples of this gospel-which-is-not-the-gospel, including: 'If you really have faith, God will care for you', and 'If you are sincere, God will be on your side', and 'If you trusted more in God your troubles/worries/sickness would be over'. Hebart notes:

Those ifs and others like them...are the greatest enemies of the gospel of God's grace in Christ, for what God does is made to depend on what we do (One in the Gospel, 66).

What Hebart calls the 'legal gospel', I used to call 'conditional theology'. Gerhard Forde calls it 'adverbial theology'. All three phrases point to the same false gospel: God is 'for us' and God accepts us provided that we do this or that, and do it sincerely, faithfully, fervently, truly, and whatever other adverbs the preacher cares to add. We act appropriately; God responds appropriately.

Carl Braaten's term for the phenomenon I have been describing is 'the legalization of the gospel'. Legalisers of the gospel infiltrate law into the gospel, and so 'legalise' the gospel to death. From a Lutheran point of view, the legalisation of the gospel is the worst of all failures in preaching and pastoral practice. Why this is so will, I hope, become clear as we review the Lutheran Confessions' response to the legalisation of the gospel, and then in the light of that response, critique Rick Warren's influential book, *The Purpose Driven Life*.

Justification and the law/gospel distinction

The context in which Braaten speaks of the legalisation of the gospel is an essay on what he calls 'the law/gospel principle', specifically in a discussion of the paradox of justification. The paradox is this, that 'the verdict of justification is valid prior to the works of the regenerate heart and in spite of every human failure'. Braaten concludes: 'Any qualification

of this priority and this paradox leads to synergistic heresy and the legalization of the gospel' (*Principles of Lutheran Theology*,109).

The legalisation of the gospel has three strikes against it: first, it is an attack on the doctrine of justification, the article upon which 'rests all that we teach and practice'(Smalcald Articles II,1.5). Secondly, it is an attack on Christ: it buries him. Thirdly, it is an attack on terrified sinners: it leaves them helpless under the law with all its accusations, and it leaves their consciences uncomforted.

The theological and methodological issue here is the confusion of law and gospel. Law and gospel must be properly distinguished. 'We must...observe this distinction with particular diligence lest we confuse the two doctrines and change the gospel into law'. And why is that so bad? 'This would darken the merit of Christ and rob disturbed consciences of the comfort they would otherwise have in the holy gospel when it is preached purely and without admixture' (*Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration.V,1*).

These twin concerns – that Christ is magnified and troubled consciences are comforted – are dear to the hearts of the Lutheran confessors. We should not be surprised to find, then, that these concerns recur as a kind of cantus firmus throughout the Confessions. What follows is only a sample.

The Formula of Concord

The Formula of Concord concludes its summary of the article on law and gospel with the words:

[W]e reject and deem it as false and detrimental when men teach that the Gospel strictly speaking, is a proclamation of conviction and reproof and not exclusively a proclamation of grace. Thereby the Gospel is again changed into a teaching of

the law, the merit of Christ and the Holy Scriptures are obscured, Christians are robbed of their true comfort, and the doors are again opened to the papacy (Epitome V,11).

In its expansion of this summary statement, the Formula of Concord emphasises that every care should be taken 'to avoid anything that might give occasion for a confusion between them [ie, law and gospel] by which the two doctrines would be tangled together and made into one doctrine'. It then warns against darkening 'the merits and benefits of Christ', and once more making 'the gospel a teaching of the law' (Solid Declaration V,27). Note the twin Christological and pastoral concerns expressed here, and the warning that confusing law and gospel turns the gospel into law.

The statement on 'the righteousness of faith before God' in the Formula of Concord takes pains to distinguish between justification and new obedience or good works. It argues that in Romans 3:28 Paul teaches that 'neither the preceding contrition nor the subsequent works belong in the article or matter of justification by faith. For good works do not precede justification; rather they follow it, since a person must first be righteous before he can do good works' (Solid Declaration III,27). It then expresses its pastoral and Christological concerns also in connection with the central article of the faith:

[I]n order to afford saddened consciences dependable and reliable comfort and to give due honour to the merit of Christ and the grace of God, Scripture teaches that the righteousness of faith before God consists solely in a gracious reconciliation or the forgiveness of sins, which is bestowed upon us by pure grace because of the unique merit of Christ, the mediator, and which we receive only by faith in

the promise of the Gospel (Solid Declaration III,30).

The Formula of Concord was simply repeating what the confessors at Augsburg had said fifty years earlier, that 'we obtain grace and are justified before God through faith in Christ and not through works'. In Article 20 of the Augsburg Confession the confessors point out that this teaching about faith 'which is the chief article in the Christian life' had been neglected and even held in contempt. But, Article 20 continues:

God-fearing and anxious consciences find that by experience it [ie, the article on justification by faith] offers the greatest consolation because the consciences of men cannot be pacified by any work but only by faith when they are sure that for Christ's sake they have a gracious God. It is as Paul teaches in Rom.5:1, 'Since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God'. This whole teaching is to be referred to that conflict of the terrified conscience, nor can it be understood apart from that conflict...Consciences used to be plagued by the doctrine of works when consolation from the Gospel was not heard (15-17,19).

The Apology of the Augsburg Confession

Article 12 of the Apology ('Penitence'), again articulates the pastoral and Christological burden of the Confessions. Melanchthon writes, for example:

Let pious consciences know, therefore, that God commands them to believe that they are freely forgiven because of Christ, not because of our works. Let them sustain themselves with this command of God against despair and against the terrors of sin and death...Truly, we insult Christ and abrogate the Gospel if we believe that we obtain the forgiveness of sins because of the law or in any other way except by faith in

Christ (XII,72,77).

It is, however, in Article 4 ('Justification') that Melanchthon weaves together the major threads of confessional interest, that is:

- a. the article of justification by faith [=the forgiveness of sins];*
- b. the importance of properly dividing law and gospel, and so not turning the gospel into law;*
- c. magnifying and honouring Christ (instead of 'burying Christ'); and*
- d. providing consolation for troubled consciences.*

Melanchthon introduces his presentation on the doctrine of justification by stating what is at stake:

In this controversy the main doctrine of Christianity is involved; when it is properly understood, it illumines and magnifies the honour of Christ and brings pious consciences the abundant consolation that they need. ... Since our opponents understand neither the forgiveness of sins nor faith nor grace nor righteousness, they confuse this doctrine miserably, obscure the glory and blessings of Christ, and rob pious consciences of the consolation offered them in Christ (IV,2,3).

'By way of preface', Melanchthon speaks of the two sources of doctrine which are in conflict here. Both sides appeal to Scripture. But Melanchthon's opponents read the texts using 'law' lenses. Hence their source is the law-read Scriptures. Lutherans read Scripture through 'law/promise' lenses. Hence the source of Lutheran doctrine is the law/promise-read Scriptures.

When reading the Scriptures through law/promise lenses, law and promise are to be carefully distinguished, for this distinction serves to ensure the proper proclamation of the gospel. If that distinction is not observed, then the gospel is legalised, and there is no good news for the sinner. The gospel promises and gives what it promises. The law demands, but does not give what it demands. It demands total obedience. Sinners cannot meet this demand, and they resent the divine law which makes such impossible demands. Thus their sin and guilt before God increase.

Whenever the law is mixed with, or preferred to, the gospel, the gospel does not just play second fiddle; it disappears and Christ is 'buried' (IV,18, 81). And if Christ is buried, then the poor troubled conscience has no comfort. Pastorally and theologically, this is serious stuff. It must not be taken lightly. Hence, at the end of his presentation of the doctrine of justification, and before taking up the objections of the opponents, Melanchthon repeats what is at stake in the controversy:

We are debating about an important issue, the honour of Christ and the source of sure and firm consolation for pious minds -whether we should put our trust in Christ or in our own works. If we put it in our works, we rob Christ of his honour as mediator and propitiator. And in the judgment of God we shall learn that this trust was vain and our consciences will then plunge into despair. For if the forgiveness of sins and reconciliation do not come freely for Christ's sake, but for the sake of our love, nobody will have the forgiveness of sins unless he keeps the whole law, because the law does not justify so long as it can accuse us. Justification is reconciliation for Christ's sake. Therefore it is clear that we are justified by faith, for it is sure that we receive the forgiveness of sins by faith alone

(IV, 156-158).

II

Why the fuss? Why draw attention to sixteenth century debates? Today Lutheran pastors worth their salt share the Confessions' zeal for getting the doctrine of justification right, for not legalising the gospel, for magnifying Christ and comforting troubled consciences. However, old temptations linger in the 21st century church. They are being fed by the IT revolution, which channels a variety of theological streams into the pastor's office and into the homes of Lutheran people. The material available is attractive, well-written, popular – and it is widely used for study, devotional, and preaching purposes.

A reality check is in order.

Faith and Obedience

What is the relationship between faith and obedience? For centuries Lutherans have been accused of separating faith from obedience, faith from love, justification from sanctification. And it has to be admitted that Lutherans have sometimes given the impression that justification is everything and that the new obedience or good works or discipleship are optional extras in the lives of Christians.

The Lutheran Confessions are, of course, adamant that faith and obedience, faith and works, justification and sanctification, do indeed belong together. Let one example suffice:

Faith alone accepts the forgiveness of sins, justifies and regenerates. Then love and other good works follow...As we have already stated, we teach that a man is justified when, with his conscience terrified by the preaching of penitence, he

takes heart and believes that he has a gracious God for Christ's sake. This faith is accounted for righteousness before God (Rom 4:3,5). When the heart is encouraged and quickened by faith in this way, it receives the Holy Spirit. Through his renewal we can keep the law, love God and his Word, obey God in the midst of afflictions, and practice chastity, love toward our neighbour, and so forth (Apology IV,292, 293).

The Confessions teach that sanctification flows from justification; love and good works follow faith; faith produces obedience. These things should not, indeed can not, be separated. Separating them means there is something wrong with our preaching of justification. If we have been guilty of separating them, the remedy is not to meld them, make them interchangeable or indistinguishable. Do that, and we come down on the side of the very theologies from which the Lutheran confessors wanted to distance themselves. The Confessions oppose the view that love 'informs' or 'completes' justifying faith (classical Roman Catholicism), or that obedience is an essential part of justifying faith (classical Reformed theology). When the Confessions teach 'faith alone' they mean just that: justification is by faith in Jesus Christ, not faith plus love or faith plus works or faith plus obedience. The whole content of the gospel is the forgiveness of sins, justification by faith. This is the whole content of the gospel, not just the main content.

Hence, to proclaim the whole gospel, Lutherans carefully distinguish between faith on the one hand and obedience on the other. We strive not to mix the two. If that language sounds familiar, it is meant to. For the distinction we make between faith and obedience is of the same nature and the same order as that which we make between law and gospel.

If we mix justification by faith with love, good works, obedience, or discipleship, we are mixing law and gospel. We are legalising the gospel. And the results are predictable: Christ is not magnified and the troubled sinner is not comforted. When we oblige sinners to analyse their own love or lack of it, their own obedience or lack of it, their own good works or lack of them – and suggest that their continued blessed status before God depends on their imperfect performance, then we are pointing them to themselves, their own righteousness, and driving them back to the law. We are depriving them of the comfort they should have in the ‘pure’ gospel, that is, in the gospel which has not been legalised or mixed with law. As the Apology says: ‘If they are supposed to believe that they have a gracious God because they love and keep the law, they will have to doubt whether they have a gracious God’ (IV,301).

Legalism and the Gospel in Papua New Guinea

Colleagues,

Last week’s ThTh post predicted that this week we’d ship out Part II of “Legalism and Ascension Day 2005.” The prediction did carry a “D.v.,” (Deo volente = God willing), and gave a couple of signals of what was to come. That was the plan. But then came an alternate Deo volente, an unanticipated essay on the very same topic. From someone I’d never heard of in Papua New Guinea. He’s Anton J. Lutz, a theology degree graduate (2003) of Valparaiso University in Indiana, USA. How well he

learned his craft, his Law/Promise theology, you'll soon see. [They are apparently still hustling that at VU. Is VU "tasol" (Pidgin English, see below) in that endeavor?] Anton tells us a bit more about himself as his essay unfolds. Enjoy!

Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

Events and Comments. Thinking on the "Reform Lutheran" Short Course

Crater Lake, Papua New Guinea

April 21-25, 2005

By Anton J. Lutz

Around here, it's as tough as it is anywhere to put up with other people's bad ideas about God and grace. This last Sunday our pastor was called out of the pulpit and forbidden to preach by a woman who is feuding with his family. She has been slandering his daughter, who is sick, and now the daughter is taking this pulpit-and-reputation battering woman to court. Her claim on Sunday morning was that the pastor hadn't kept his daughter in line and thus wasn't fit to preach. The preaching replacement (not a pastor) gave us unqualified heresy discreetly bumbling along in the guise of Christian piety. Well, not so discreetly. It was pretty awful.

I gave another pastor a ride the other day and asked him as we bumped along about this business of "taking one's keys away." He answered that it was the Church's job to confront the sinner thrice and then to treat them as they would treat any other sinner. Which, as he understood it, was to ban them from the

assembly. If the sinner was a pastor, he'd be banned from preaching and administering the sacrament. And sins, really, are anything a person is irked about and can locate a passage from the Bible to prop up their legalistic usually-contradictory claim. The only three verses I've never heard used are these: One. Judge not. Two. Let the one without sin throw the first stone. Three. Get that plank out of your own eye, stupid!

Around here, it's as tough as anywhere to say something true in the face of other people's bad theological ideas. Tough, I think, but it's one way to talk about what the calling of pastor, theologian and follower of the Master ends up looking like. My name is Anton Lutz, I follow in the steps of my parents, grandparents and great-grandparents in finding my vocation as a Lutheran missionary. I live in Papua New Guinea, in the Enga Province at the end of the road. I'm not a pastor and only a dabbling theologian. I'm an explorer of the places followers of the Master find themselves, and that seems to suit me so far.

Here follows a description of what we could call a theological adventure. I was invited to attend a pastors' and evangelists' retreat at Lake Lau in the middle of the province held during the last weeks of April, 2005. The intent of the organizers was to reinforce in their evangelists the basics of Lutheran teaching and to encourage all present for their return to their places of work. Also invited were Dr Steve Lutz, MD, and Pastor Anjelan who is currently serving at the Wapenamanda Lutheran (GLC – Gutnius Lutheran Church) congregation. Dr Steve was to speak on issues of healthy living and Anjelan was to speak on issues regarding pastoral care.

The attendees included two pastors from Papayuku circuit (now renamed "Promise") and eight or more evangelists and headmen

from the congregations of the circuit. Most of the congregations in that area do not have full-time pastors and are served by these evangelists. Also, about ten youth from the Tupangus congregation were present and assisting with things like food transportation, housing, firewood and singing during morning and evening devotions.

With the exception of Anjelan, Steve and myself, all the participants were "Reform Lutheran." Reform Lutheran meaning they've split from the other Lutherans in such a manner that they feel entitled to self-designate as Reformers. In addition to being theologically sympathetic to the Reform cause, Anjelan is from Yakopmanda, our staging point and the home and congregation of Pastor Daniel T Pato, circuit leader of Promise. Daniel was the organizer of the event.

Pastor Anjelan, however, declined to attend at the last minute, citing the spiritual needs of his congregation. In his opinion, as expressed to myself and Dr Steve, "people" are already calling him "Reform" and if he attends this retreat, "they" will have grounds to remove him. Or drive him from his vocation and congregation. Or, in his words; "they want to remove my Key."

Interested, I pressed further. Anjelan and Daniel told us that several other prominent teachers and theologians of the GLC have recently (in the last year) had their "keys" removed. What this means, if it is true, and what the cause is, I do not know.

But while I may not know, I do suspect. I suspect that the removal of one's Key is something resembling a mix between defrocking and excommunication. It is not handed down as a response to theological heresy, however, but instead intends to combat political mis-alliance. The GLC, apparently, has their

own set of Keys, which they can grant and revoke. The Reform boys, I was led to believe, still feel they have authentic Keys. But not GLC ones. Such that Daniel could blithely encourage Anjelan to just do what is right (come present at this short course with his friends) and not worry about getting his Key removed. Daniel seemed to enjoy the confidence of one who has already been cast out (or already cast himself out) and is enjoying the new-found freedom.

“They” is the “Office.” Neither more nor less ambiguous. “Office” indicates ambiguous Gutnius Lutheran Church officials, bishops and administration.

A few days later, Dr Steve and I picked up Pr Daniel and Pr Anjelan from Wapenamanda and drove with them to Papayuku and then to Yakopmanda. At Papayuku, I noted that the old circuit office was perhaps the most dilapidated yet perhaps-functional room I’d ever seen. The Bible School was on vacation and reported to have fewer than ten students and one teacher. Across the road from the old circuit office, smack in the middle of the station, was the huge superstructure of a “haus sel” – a revival tent.

The crowd that gathered was civil and friendly in their interactions with each other. As we drove away, however, Daniel confided to me that the whole station had sold out, that they were “haus sel” worshippers, that even the so-called Lutheran pastor had fallen on his knees in that very tent! Apparently I was supposed to take this knee-falling as a form of idolatry. In fact, the reason the Reform Lutherans left Papayuku station, even abandoning the very name, was that so many had fallen to this “false religion.” Now, I was assured, they follow the liturgy, hold fast to the cross of Christ and to prove it all, have named themselves “Promise Circuit.”

At Yakopmanda we were warmly greeted and welcomed. They showed us around the church building. It was kept in a well-groomed yard with a solid wall and gate installed in front. "We are pure here," they kept assuring me. "We have not collaborated with any revival types or with the Lutherans that do."

That night, as it became clear that Anjelan could not be talked out of his plan to return to Wapenamanda without accompanying us on the retreat, Dr Steve suggested that I be permitted to tackle some topics or in some other way add to the short course. After all, he pointed out, I have a degree in theology. It was quickly agreed that I would take Anjelan's topic – shepherding the people of God. As the night wore on, then, I looked across the fire at Anjelan and asked: "I don't really know what your situation is: we have on the one hand 'Kristen pasin' [Christian 'fashion' = Christian way of life, in Pidgin English] and, on the other, "Kristen bilip" [Christian belief, faith] – can you explain to me your beef with these revival types on each count?"

Regarding "Kristen pasin," he said, the movements have forsaken the liturgy. They require their people to give up smoking and betelnut. They dance as they worship and sing for forty minutes at the beginning of the gathering. They declare that the more "traditional" Lutheran pastors preach a false Gospel. They've given up the creed, the Our Father and the invocation of Triune God at the opening of a gathering. They steal our faithful Lutheran members and some of our clergy have fallen to their wiles as well.

Regarding "Kristen bilip," he said, movements value dreams and spur-of-the-moment prophecy as coequal with or superior to scripture. They believe that real Christians speak in tongues and that this is a key mark of authenticity. If one's works do not come up to Christian par, one is not a real Christian.

Among other things.

I was surprised that Anjelan could form these two lists off the top of his head with no discussion or even time for careful thought. These concerns were obviously long-held and carefully considered. And I could easily see why a group of competent Lutheran clergy might consider cutting ties with those who participate in and condone (even tacitly) such behavior and belief.

How best to talk about shepherding the people of God, given this reality? I fell asleep with thoughts swirling.

We walked on Thursday and after settling into camp and eating dinner, got into a fascinating discussion. The group asked Dr Steve to tell them about the tsunami of December 26. (He had gone to Banda Aceh and Nias in the second and third weeks of January.) Instead of telling them a tale of woe and hope and disaster and grace, as he can do so well, he instead asked them why they wanted to hear this. Why do you care about so many who died?

It became clear that what they really wanted to know was “Why did this happen to them?” Which is another way of saying, “Will it happen to us?” Which is another way of saying, “Tell us what they did wrong so that we can avoid the same fate.” These implied issues became explicit as the conversation wore on.

In the ensuing discussion, both Genesis 19 (Lot and Sodom) and Exodus 20:5 (the so-called Conclusion of the Ten Commandments – really the prologue) were called upon to defend the position that God really does hand out curse and death on those who fail to follow the appropriate laws. Both texts were again used the following day in a discussion regarding HIV and AIDS. How best to talk about shepherding the people of God in this context? I fell asleep again with my thoughts in a muddle.

By Friday morning, I had a long agenda of things that I thought needed prompt and careful attention. As follows: What is the point of being “pure Lutheran?” What is the Good News? How can we keep from people hearing it as Bad News? What is the role of a pastor or evangelist? What are they actually supposed to be doing? Keeping the flock’s faith pure? Growing the flock? Ensuring good attendance? What, actually, is the point of liturgy? How many kinds are there? Does God really care if we dance and sing for forty minutes? Does God really care if we demote the authority of scripture and denounce other clergy as false? How can we understand the one Tok Pisin [=Talk Pidgin] word, “bilip,” such that it speaks of faith, the things one believes, and how neither are a work required of us prior to salvation? Et cetera.

And, ambitious as always, I thought it was a good idea to tackle all this in my two or three hours. No, no. No need to comment at all.

I centered most of my remarks on the ideas found, I am led to believe, in the Augsburg Confession, Article IV, Justification by Faith alone. For proclamation to be Good News, it must cling to the sufficiency and necessity of the Cross. And it must give comfort to the penitent sinner. That makes three utterly unforsakable points – sufficiency, necessity, comfort to one penitent. So, then, if we tell someone God will love them (save them, redeem them, help them) if they repent and/or believe, how is that Good News? That’s not the GOOD news at all! I think I must inevitably hear it as Very Bad News. What if I believe something that isn’t quite orthodox? What if I don’t believe very strongly? What if I usually do, but on Thursday, the morning I die, I have a size 4.5 doubt? If my salvation is depending on something I do and do very well (or at least well enough), like believing or repenting, then I will never hear it as truly Good News. Maybe we can call these the Lutheran

versions of works-righteousness: belief-righteousness; repentance-righteousness.

So then the work a pastor must do is to make God's Word come to the ears and minds of people as real Good News. And yes, even hearing that I can't get to God on my own is Good News. Good News because it is paired with the proclamation that Jesus can and did do this salvation thing for me, without my participation or cooperation. The Cross alone is sufficient. Jesus Christ alone is necessary. This is Good News and it is received by trust, not assent.

But so often, and these pastors and evangelists pointed this out to me, they fall and fail and insert "sapos"-statements [Pidgin from "suppose," grammatically an "if" – Sapos (if) you do this, then God will do that.] into their sermons. "We hear what you are saying and see that we don't usually say it [the Good News] like that; we tell people if they don't believe, then they are going to hell. We tell people, if they aren't serious about repenting, then they are already judged." And some cited the Genesis and Exodus texts to me. And then some included John 3:18 and something in Romans 3, the verse of which I did not catch. "What do you say to these?" And as I don't know my favorite proof texts to counter such vicious attacks, I just had to say "Well, it sure sounds like God has conditions on his utterly free gift of life. And it sounds like Jesus didn't have it in him to do all the saving. And it sounds like you better get your act together if you want to see heaven. And it sounds like God promises mercy only to those who jump through the right hoops." I said it. Just like that.

"But hold on. That is NOT how it is. God is enough. God is always enough. We don't need to help God save us. We can't. We trust (holimpas) [from "hold it fast"] God's promise because it is God's promise. We don't believe [the right things] in order

to get God to make us a promise. Don't put God's mercy in a little box. Even in a little box with sides that have Bible verses written on them."

The point of Lutheranism, I told them, is to stick to Augsburg IV and keep saying it – ever new – so that it is Good News and not Horribly Bad News. Say a promise, not an if/then! The point of Lutheranism isn't to be the Holy, Pure, Real and Only church – though, of course, those are all realities. Except for the Only part. Lutherans continue to remind the world that Jesus Christ and He alone is enough to effect our salvation. Lutherans must not give up this claim. It's the claim we went to bat over, way back when. Even if it is tempting to get lots and lots of members and material benefits galore by joining up with a movement. Or tempting to feel pretty good about your stellar doctrine and piety.

Going into this, I had the hunch that some of this would be news for them. In my years of listening to Engan Lutheran sermons, I know that most pastors fall easily into teaching beliefs-righteousness. And I know that once a person thinks they know something, its terribly difficult to persuade them that they have been wrong or even that there is another legitimate position that can be held. And yet I was very pleasantly surprised with their attention, their careful questions, their willingness to take what I was saying seriously and ponder it. Beginning during that session and continuing over the remaining two days I heard repeated and heart-felt comments to this effect: "Thank you so much for coming and teaching us. We have no input and we can see that we've been astray and have been making God's Good News into Bad News. Thank you for reminding us of God's mercy."

By way of summary, my point in the discussion of liturgy was simply that we ought not jump like frogs just because something

is new and/or foreign. It needs to be evaluated, like everything else, according to Scripture and the principles of Augsburg IV. If something in the praxis or theology of a new liturgical breed denies that Jesus was enough or claims that something must be done by the human creature to get God to love and redeem it, then yes, react to it. You'd be doing wrong to let such notions slip into popular theology. But, inherently, there is nothing damaging with extended scripture reading (Ezra did it) or dancing in worship (David did it) or lengthy prayer (Jesus did it).

The rest of what we talked about that day circled mainly on these ideas. After a fishing expedition we settled in for a post-dinner discussion. The main concern they raised was this: "We have been ever zealous for the Lord and now they seek to destroy us. We are the last pure remnant that preserves theology and liturgy the way the missionaries taught it to us without letting the movement types bastardize it. And they (the main Lutheran church) have cast us out and don't let us attend seminary and keep us from being fed and strengthened. In fact, we have to resort to these Bible studies and seminars among ourselves for renewal and encouragement. We have been ever zealous and are being destroyed. Tell us what we should do."

And in it I heard a hint of the "So many Christians tell each other that they must do certain things in order to be acceptable to God – most often a familiar, comfortable combination of 'believe/repent!' But we know we shouldn't proclaim that sort of Bad News. Truly we know. But it's going to be very lonely. And very tough. And I think I'm going to fail."

By my translation and paraphrase you can tell that I referred them to the tale of Elijah's despair and God's response on Sinai. "No, you can't quit. Go do your job, I'll be with you."

I didn't know what else to say.

I will say this about that group of pastors and evangelists: they know their needs and that they cannot fulfill them adequately on their own. They consider themselves the true keepers of the sacred missionary legacy – meaning that the words of theological neophytes (yet still whiter-than-missionaries) like myself and Dr Steve carry inordinate weight. I ended up being invited to speak at their district conference next month on God's mercy and the Good News. I think: if there is anything reformed Lutherans should be really good at talking about, it's God's mercy and the Good News. But they want me (!) to come and talk on those issues.

That night, Aposel Yaros delivered a stunning sermon at evening devotions which never once lapsed into "sapos" talk. At the end, he asked, "Is that how the Good News is supposed to be?" And we all said: YES!

Aposel Yaros is one of four men present with us who have completed three-fourths of their seminary education at Timothy Lutheran Seminary and never returned after their vicarage [year of internship]. There are several factors, I am sure, but the current complaint is that even if they did want to go back and finish, they will not be permitted because they are "Reform." It could also be, of course, that they will not stoop to fraternizing with such types as inhabit the seminary. But their words to me were that they would, in fact, like to attend and are prohibited from doing so.

On Sunday afternoon two of my new friends who I thought were on top of things ran a rousing short course on church growth. The church is alive, we were told, and God isn't interested in seeing it die. For you see, like plants in the garden, either something is growing or it is dying – there is no neutral

status. So we can see that God wants it to grow. But, be warned, you can't count growth by numbers of pew-sitters.

And then, then they launched into a lovely list of "if-statements" put on every single aspect of the Gospel. As though they had forgotten or disregarded every last thing we'd come to agreement on the previous day. I was impressed. I did my best to keep my mouth shut to the last and then tried, carefully, to ask him where God's mercy was. "I've heard a lot about God's checklists for acceptability just now." We had another excellent discussion which concluded where the previous day's had; strong assertions of the principles of Augsburg IV and how they inform how we read all our favorite Biblical "if-then" passages. Etc. And that pretty much wrapped things up.

By way of summary, let me say these:

The reform pastors and evangelists were as Lutheran as any I've met. They are considerably more thoughtful than most.

They have an instinctual hunch about other theologies which deny the necessity and/or sufficiency of the Cross. In their phrase, (we) Lutherans cling to the cross.

The group I was with have a deep and unsatisfied hunger for spiritual, pastoral and theological nourishment.

The group I was with truly have the attitude of learners. Impressive for Engans and for Lutherans.

I had heard that the Reform group has no interest in missionary/overseas input, money, etc. I saw nothing to corroborate this. If someone were to come offer short courses to them, to make it possible for them to have relevant and useful teaching materials and so forth, they would be very

grateful. Furthermore, I've heard second-hand that some GLC pastors who attended Pastor Harvey Kath's short course held at Lake Kapiago suggested to him that groups like the PNGMS [=Papua New Guinea Mission Society, mostly folks who once served in PNG] send two teachers – one for the steadfast GLC and one for the breakaway, yet still faithful, Reform Lutherans.

There is a sickness in the GLC where pastors are having their Keys removed on a political whim. That this is happening to those pastors most theologically on-the-ball just makes the situation worse.

In my opinion, (perhaps unfounded), most of the rank and file clergy of the GLC have no ill-feelings toward the Reform Lutherans. Many share the same concerns as the Reforms and yet are themselves unwilling to part ways with the GLC. For whatever reason.

It is almost pointless to try to cram in everything [that I tried to cram in] into even a one-week course. I need to remember that I learned and came to believe these things over many moons. Yet I'm glad we got the chance to be there with them and say the things we did. The Lord might still work in mysterious and unexpected ways.

Which is really to say: I don't actually expect attitude, behavior or skills change to result after a "short course." As Dr Steve notes, among hospital staff, short courses do nothing to change patient care. But if a person goes to a one-year course, then yes, one can see that they have learned something. Old ruts are not easily re-dug elsewhere.

There is a tendency among Papua New Guineans to tell the whiteskin what they think he wants to hear. "Yes, what you've said is sweet to our ears." And as one has said, the Enga will

make you a Bigman if you blink twice. Which makes the final quality of our reception among them uncertain. But they did ask that we put down on paper all that we had discussed and presented so they could have it for future reference. Which might indicate something. Or it might not.

I've also decided to take them seriously on their request for teaching materials. We noted a dearth of useful / authoritative resources for the pastors here to use. And there is so much crap floating around. Like in a septic tank. Papua New Guineans in general and Engan Lutherans in particular experience an authority crisis when it comes to who is worth listening to. Just because it is being sold in the Kristen Book Shop or in the religion section of Barnes and Noble or being published by Fortress or CPH does not mean that it is worth anything. For instance, it's likely that if you or I were to write a basic pamphlet or a book on Christian teaching or theology and distribute it to them, they would read it over and over and then take it to heart. Regardless of your true authority or mine.

And I am likely not the appropriate theological watchdog for what is taken as authoritative material by Lutherans here. And I'm not sure that the folks who remove other people's "keys" are any better. Nor, likely, are people who spend their time in other countries. Huh. It might be worth thinking about, anyway.

The one resource that several of the Lake Lau retreat participants had was a little pamphlet published by Kristen Press Inc., Richard Haar, 1988. Its four sections are Marimari Tasol, Baibel Tasol, Bilip Tasol and Kraist Tasol [tasol = that's all] – grace alone, scripture alone, faith alone, Christ alone. I thought most of it very good. The "Bilip Tasol" section was confusing and contradicted its own claims and in the end was not very useful. Given my predispositions, anyway.

Legalism and Ascension Day 2005, Part I

Colleagues,

Legalism and Ascension. How, pray tell, do THESE two fit together? I too wondered. Legalism was intended as the topic for today (actually in response to a request!) and then—liturgically challenged as I am—I found out at today's morning devotions that today is 40 days after Easter, the "Feast of our Lord's Ascension."

Every time this day rolls around I recall the mantra given us seminarians by "Doc" Caemmerer midway in the last century. Why did Jesus ascend? one of us novices asked. "In order to be equally close to all his disciples," Doc said. Had he stayed around in some place on earth, some could have been "closer" to him than others, and thus more easily "cling" to Jesus. [See ThTh 356 of 4 weeks ago on Mary's attempted interference with Christ's Ascension.] Now he is equidistant, better equi-present, to all his followers in proclamation and sacrament, and the rest of the means of grace.

The church's Ascension hymns hype Christ's departure as his coronation, the last phase of Easter. "The strife is o'er, the battle won." "Crowns become the victor's brow." Or in Venerable Bede's prose of a millennium and a half ago, "Christ by a road before untrod [the cross] ascends unto the throne of God."

Granted, it's all choreographed within the specs of a three-storey universe—heaven, earth, the underworld. So what? That's

how they perceived the cosmos, their metaphors for how it's put together. It calls us more recent disciples with our images of big bangs and throbbing emanations with waves and quanta and black holes, etc. to do likewise. And do our images make the universe any less mysterious? Hardly. It's even more so.

And for those whom this "primitive" cosmology still rankles, Paul Ricoeur (hardly a Luddite) proposes a "second naivete" to go beyond the first one of making cosmic metaphors literal. E.g., Christ's "descent into hell" is not akin to a tourist trip, but a statement about his victory in the realm where death has had the last word and where the Prince of Death otherwise holds sway. So how do we Easter people make the same confession in the age of the Hubble telescope?

I don't really know enough about the Hubble world to make any suggestions, but those of you for whom this might be your daily work, send in your proposals. Something like Nathan Schroeder did a few weeks ago with his venture into IT images for a theory of the atonement.

The message of the ascension, victory and coronation, is not only hype and hoopla for Jesus, but about us too. Back to the ascension hymns. One from William C. Dix.

*Alleluia! Not as orphans Are we left in sorrow now;
Alleluia! He is near us; Faith believes, nor questions how.
Though the cloud from sight received him When the forty days
were o'er,
Shall our hearts forget his promise: "I am with you
evermore"? Alleluia! Bread of heaven, Here on earth our food,
our stay;
Alleluia! Here the sinful Flee to you from day to day.
Intercessor, friend of sinners, Earth's redeemer, hear our plea
Where the songs of all the sinless Sweep across the crystal*

sea.

*Alleluia! King eternal, Lord omnipotent we own;
Alleluia! Born of Mary, Earth your footstool, heav'n your throne.*

As within the veil you entered, Robed in flesh our great high priest,

Here on earth both priest and victim In the eucharistic feast.

Yes, that takes a bit of second naivete, but especially that last line repeats Doc Caemmerer's mantra, equi-present to all of us in the eucharistic feast. Call it "real presence."

What makes ascension a component of the Gospel, genuinely Good News, is that we are the beneficiaries of Christ's grand finale. Note Christ's "promise" in the first verse above.

Jaroslav J. Vajda does the same for us in his ascension hymn. It's a three-storied scenario, but its focus is Christ's promise about "an endless Eastertide" all tied in to the "second paraclete" that Jesus promises in the gospel of John, i.e., Pentecost. Here's the full text:

Up through endless ranks of angels, Cries of triumph in his ears,

To his heav'nly throne ascending, Having vanquished all their fears,

Christ looks down upon his faithful, Leaving them in happy tears. Death-destroying, life-restoring, Proven equal to our need,

Now for us before the Father As our brother intercede;

Flesh that for our world was wounded, Living, for the wounded plead!

To our lives of wanton wand'ring Send your promised Spirit

guide;

*Through our lives of fear and failure With your pow'r and love
abide;*

Welcome us, as you were welcomed, To an endless Eastertide.

Alleluia! Alleluia! Oh, to breathe the Spirit's grace!

Alleluia! Alleluia! Oh, to see the Father's face!

Alleluia! Alleluia! Oh, to feel the Son's embrace!

Now how to link this Ascension gospel to legalism? Well, it's clearly a contrast between good news and bad news. But I need more time to work on that. So I'll bring this to closure for this festival day and, d.v., hope to do the other half next Thursday.

Here are a couple of thoughts about that.

1. Every "-ism" is an implicit or explicit soteriology—even communism, capitalism or consumerism. "Isms" are proposals for salvation, either lower-case "s" or upper case "S."
2. Legalism is a soteriology. It is the notion of salvation we are born with. So it still vexes Christians plagued as they are by their Old Adams and Old Eves. It is an alternate to the salvation offer coming from the Ascended Lord.
3. St. Paul's argument with his Galatian Christians is precisely about that. Can Christ's promissory lordship be shared with Moses' rule-of-law in the daily life of Christ's people? Is Moses a resource for distinctively Christian ethics? I think Paul says no—for what to him are "perfectly clear" reasons.
4. The conflict in Galatians is the first recorded debate about a "third use of God's law," as Lutheran lingo puts it, in the church's history. Paul's claims that calling on Moses for guidance in following Christ—even the "good

stuff” in Moses—is switching lordships. If Paul had known the English term, he’d have said legalism. It’s not just a matter of ethics, but it’s soteriology, an alternate notion of salvation. Therefore his grim words for Christ-confessors who go there is: Christ died in vain.

5. Here’s a paragraph from W. Elert’s book THE CHRISTIAN ETHOS that deserves consideration.[It is my translation. The text for this paragraph in the existing English translation, p. 380, misses the point, I think.]

“To ask about a ‘third use of the law’ recapitulates once more the problem I am addressing in this entire Ethics book—the qualitative difference between ethos under law and ethos under grace. This ‘third use’ attempt is always made when someone views God’s plan of salvation as restoring morality to the world. Or expressed in other words: when someone sees the kingdom of God to consist in God’s making commands and humankind obeying them. Christ’s coming then has this purpose: he pays the penalty for human disobedience, but finally brings mankind to the way of obedience. Here the law is given priority in distinguishing law and gospel. It is seen as the eternally valid communication of God’s commands. The Gospel comes in as an aid for keeping the law. The gospel in a certain sense validates itself by helping believers finally achieve what they could not achieve without its assistance, namely, fulfilling the law. For this to happen, the law must tell the believers “what they ought to do.” That is what the “third use” is for. Those aspects of the law which contradict the Gospel—its threat, its guilt-verdict, its demand for atonement—are viewed as no longer active because of Christ. He has wiped them away. The only thing remaining in the law’s operation is that it is a “rule for living.”

More on this, God willing, next time.

Peace & joy!

Ed Schroeder

Art Simon's book on American Affluence, a Review

Colleagues,

Art Simon attended Concordia Seminary the same time as I did (50 yrs ago). He had chutzpah then already. Example: he once recruited a bunch of us seminarians on Saturdays to go across the Mississippi River and head for nearby Troy, Illinois, to get involved in politics. Yes! To wit, to do door to door campaigning for his older brother Paul Simon on Paul's first ever venture into American politics. Paul won that election (for the Illinois state legislature) and began his move up the ladder to many terms in the US Senate. He was an explicitly Lutheran voice in US politics for decades. Paul and Art's parents had served as Lutheran missionaries to China. Some of that parental mindset clearly rubbed off on both sons. Art moved into pastoring but never left politics. He never unlearned Lutheran theology's axiom that "care and redemption"—politics and proclamation—were every Christian's calling. When Jesus said on Easter evening, "as the Father sent me, so send I you," he was saying just that. Brother Paul was also an articulate voice—maybe even superstar—in exercising such a vocation in American politics. Art was not far behind—as this book shows.

Reviewer Jim Roos here in St. Louis, also a Concordia graduate

shortly after Art, got bit by the same bug of God's ambidextrous left-hand/right-hand operations in our one world. Because of that I'm happy that he agreed to review Art's book.

Peace & joy!
Ed Schroeder

Art Simon. How Much Is Enough? Hungering for God in an Affluent Culture.

(Grand Rapids, Michigan, Baker Books, 2003)

192 pp, paperback. Price: US\$11.99

Art Simon describes how little one's happiness, joy, or satisfaction increases after basic needs for food shelter, and clothing are met. Art shows how the pursuit of riches, pleasure, and power, beyond basic needs, is addictive and destructive to one's self and to those in need. Living SIMPLY is good in itself. Art shows that living simply and lobbying our government for programs to reduce world hunger is much more effective. Finally, we do this best when our efforts are rooted in thankfulness for Christ's love.

Of the quotes on the cover of this book, my favorite is the one by Richard John Neuhaus, "Art Simon invites us to a new way of living that, freed from the shackles of consumption, is the way of gratitude and generosity. And he leaves it up to each of us to think through and pray through, exactly what that means for us."

Given the substance of the Christian faith that so many of us profess, how do we connect that faith, personal lives, and the

global community? How do we fight the shackles of consumerism and the brutality of free enterprise capitalism, which, left to itself, would ruin the environment and let people starve & leave us empty? Art himself was bugged by that dilemma 30 years ago when he founded Bread for the World. One effective way is by active membership in Bread for the World.

Art describes the poverty of riches, the sorrow of pleasure, the weakness of power. Each can be like drugs, which have to be maintained or increased, and about which we are anxious. Each can become our master rather than our servant. When such happens, the casualties are our trust in God & compassion for our neighbor. We also end with an empty life for our self.

This drive for riches and power can be corporate as well as individual. In St. Louis, Mo. I run a housing ministry to lower income families. In 2003-04, developers to whom the city of St. Louis gave eminent-domain power took and demolished 24 buildings/60 units of good, lower cost housing held by our housing ministry. We received far less than what it will cost to replace the units. On our land they built single-family homes that sell for \$129,000 to \$300,000. Neither our ministry nor our tenants can afford the new housing. A mixture of rich and powerful, public and private, entities conspired to take or benefit from resources which were used by the poor.

After our 24 properties were taken, we had more cash than ever before. I realized a temptation to make decisions based partly on how well they protected our new assets rather than entirely on how well people were served.

Not just this reviewer, but all of us in affluent America face these temptations. Do riches, pleasure, and power increase our happiness? Art's book and our own experience say, "Not at all," once we have basic shelter, clothing, and food. They give

momentary highs but not happiness.

Satisfaction with simple living and service is related to our love and faith:

Richard Foster: "The Christian life comes not by gritting our teeth but by falling in love." The Bible shows God's love for us, giving us both the way to heaven and purpose for our earthly life. God's love is as lavish as that of the father to the prodigal son.

Mother Theresa said, "Pray for me that I not loosen my grip on the hand of Jesus even under the guise of ministering to the poor."

Peter Krewet, a supporter of my ministry, once said I needed prayer more than a loan, and then helped with both. "We are not fully engaged in loving others if we tend to their physical needs & ignore their need for God."

"Sabbath Wisdom" is Art's expression for the wisdom of resting. Give yourself (and the world) a break. Retreat, rest, gain perspective, celebrate in a quiet way over the beauty of creation and in simple pleasures such as walking, playing, and spending time with friends, and then revel in healing the world physically and spiritually. Matt 6:33: Seek first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness and all these things will be added to you.

Living simply is beneficial to ourselves but inadequate in ministering to the masses. An effective way to minister to the masses is through lobbying our elected officials. In our democratic society, we must refute "the pretense of weakness." We are power-full. By our letters and phone calls to elected officials, we can improve the lives of millions. That is the purpose of the lobbying organization, "Bread For The World,"

which Art formed.

For me, HOW MUCH IS ENOUGH is powerful because it shows the nature and relationship of spiritual roots and effective ministry to the poor. I also was moved by Art's explanation of Sabbath Wisdom and the need to incorporate such in my life.

*Jim Roos,
Easter, 2005*

Pastoral Theology From an Atheist Who Became a Bishop

Colleagues,

Today's posting is a book review by Robin Morgan. Peace and joy!

Ed Schroeder

Bo Giertz. THE HAMMER OF GOD, revised edition (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Augsburg Fortress, 2005). 335 pp. Paper. Online price: US\$18.

"The Hammer of God" is a fictional look at Lutheran parish life in Sweden from the beginning of the nineteenth century to the middle of the twentieth century. Bo Giertz, pastor in the

Swedish church and eventual bishop of Göteborg Diocese, has been compared to American writer Walt Wangerin for his theological depth and penetrating personal insights. This new edition has been put out to celebrate the hundredth anniversary of Giertz' birth.

The book is divided into three novellas which follow the lives of three pastors in Ödesjö parish. Ödesjö is an out-of-the-way district far from Uppsala, yet still caught in the struggles of the respective eras represented by the tenures of these three pastors.

The first story begins in 1808 when Savonius, a young curate, an intellectual and bon vivant, comes face to face with his inadequacies as a pastor as he is summoned to the bedside of a dying man. All Savonius' academic prowess stands impotent in the face of the eternal consequences of his actions or inactions in that moment. The remainder of the story traces Savonius' maturing process as he grapples with his pastoral responsibilities and his relationship with Jesus Christ.

The second story follows a similar pattern as it begins in 1878 when Fridfeldt, "a child of the revival movement," takes up residence in Ödesjö's parsonage. His story is a particularly interesting snapshot of a young pietistic "true believer" finding his way inside the state church parish in his charge. Again, it's the maturing process in his life, both with regard to his pastoral duties and his internal faith life, that are the common threads throughout the drama of the story.

The third story set between 1937 and 1940 follows Torvik, a product of the "new theological thinking." He arrives in Ödesjö having accepted the "historical view of the Bible, an undogmatic and independent attitude toward the confessions and a warm enthusiasm for the church of his fathers" (p. 197). This

story, too, follows Torvik's maturation process from arrogant young curate through parish struggles and dark nights of the soul to wise, conservative elder statesman in the state church.

It seems appropriate to look more closely at this third story because most scholars of Giertz' writings believe that Torvik was a picture of Giertz himself. Hans Andrae, translator of the ninth chapter of this section and writer of the introductory notes, says that "Torvik is the spokesman for Giertz on all issues concerning church and theology" (p. xxx).

As one who looks for the distinction of law and promise in theological writing, I was intrigued by one scene that transpires in Torvik's life early in his tenure at Ödesjö. An older pastor comes to visit him and shortly their conversation turns to Torvik's lamentation that he is not accomplishing what he set out to do. The older pastor replies, "You must know that when God's work gets started in a man, he will sooner or later experience desperate need, the need that is created by God's Word. Then the situation is the very one you now see: one would, but cannot."

Torvik asks, "But what, then, shall a man do?"

Part of the older pastor's reply is an amazing little tour de force of law and promise explication:

"Let me teach you what you ought to have known long before you stepped into the pulpit. When an individual has been called through the power of the Word – in other words, the very thing that has been happening in this congregation of yours – that person is first enlightened by the law. He understands that there is something called sin that he must be careful to avoid. He becomes obedient, you see. That is the first awakening...But then comes the second awakening by

the law, when one sees the miserable condition of one's heart...Then one understands that, with all one's best deeds, one is and remains black as a chimney sweep. Then the danger is serious. A person will then say, either, 'If my condition is so terrible, I may as well wallow in the dirt,' and goes away and sins again. Or he will say, 'I am after all not as black as Karlsson or Lundstrom and their card-playing cronies, since I do not sin intentionally, and surely the Lord must make some distinctions on the last day,' and he goes away and becomes a self-righteous Pharisee and all is lost. Or his eyes are turned from his own miserable condition and he catches sight of the Lord Jesus Christ, who died for just such black rascals as himself. And he hears that it is faith that makes righteous, and not works. That is the enlightenment through the gospel." (p. 249)

As a glimpse into the lives of three individual pastors within their historical contexts, this book is engaging, both as a work of fiction and as a work of Lutheran theology. However, Giertz' most profound contribution to my ongoing maturation process as a Lutheran pastor comes from another perspective.

As a mission developer and inner city pastor I struggle to understand why so many within our Lutheran community say that they are committed to reaching beyond our walls to be in mission with others and yet, when it comes right down to it, block the process of mission development (very politely of course, but nonetheless adamantly). Giertz as Torvik makes a remarkably enlightening statement in this regard. Much later in his life, as a well seasoned pastor, Torvik returns to the church building after an excruciatingly painful pastoral moment with his best friend:

"Standing there, he could not help but put his hand half

caressingly on the wall and swipe it across one of the large cobblestones that showed its contour underneath the liming. Yes, Arvidsson was right, here was the stronghold. Here was the heavenly city with the firm walls that God had built on the rock Christ, so that it would rise out of the maelstrom of the ages. If one would let go of that stronghold, then one would also be swept away from the rock Christ and be absorbed by the waves" (p. 300).

I realize that Giertz was talking about the church in a broader sense than merely brick and mortar, but I also realize that for some, the brick and mortar have come to substitute for that broader perspective. Maybe I understand some of my fellow Lutherans a bit better now. They're convinced that we cannot take Jesus out into the maelstrom. We will get lost and this faith that is so important, so bedrock in our lives cannot be split from the traditions. It is in our actions of caring for our facility, in our actions of supporting the community as it has always been, that we know we believe and that the gospel will go on. For me, that is looking at their actions with Philippians 4:8 eyes ("if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think on these things").

The less-than-charitable impulses in me are inclined to say that they just don't want to deal with the mess. I can attest that mission development in the 21st century is messy. There is no blueprint, there is very little money, we make it up as we go along. Yet I have seen God at work over and over again in our midst. I have lived the older pastor's words to Torvik many times over in the year and a half I've been at Faith Place: "You must know that when God's work gets started in a man [sic], he will sooner or later experience desperate need, the need that is created by God's Word. Then the situation is the very one you now see: one would, but cannot." I cannot, but the

Lord can.

What of someone like me who claims part of this community because of Jesus, not because of the traditions? Someone like me for whom the Word is the thing? For whom Jesus isn't attached to the walls, but is living, breathing next to me, inside of me, across the globe reaching out with his love for the whole world? Do I have a part in this community that specializes in looking backwards?

Because of Christ, I say YES! Whether my backward-looking, shiva-sitting siblings grieving for the past would agree or not, I am part of this community.

We are no longer the moral arbiters of the status quo. State church-like rules no longer apply. How will we be church at the margins? One of the first orders of business is finding ways to get resources for our work that don't depend on the people who are receiving our services. Middle class self supporting congregations will no longer be the norm. People at the margins tend to have less money than those who embrace the status quo. And it won't be long, is already upon us in many ways, that most moneyed people will not support ministry which is subversive to the status quo. If we are going to be true to Jesus' own pronouncement in Luke 4, we will have to learn how to find resources for our work outside of our normal channels.

"The Hammer of God" is an engaging book that leads to much fruitful thought if one takes the time. It has helped me understand some of my sisters and brothers better and encouraged me to continue carrying this marvelous Word we've been given out into the maelstrom. If I get lost in the process, isn't that what we're called to do?

Robin Morgan

Clinging for Dear Life in the Season of Easter

Colleagues,

We've had two world-publicized instances of clinging to life for Eastertide 2005. One in Florida, one in Rome. To cling or not to cling—and if so, how long? That is the question that got public attention. Theological attention too, though none that I heard—even from the talking heads speaking from and for Rome—got around to the “cling-question” that is the clincher. Namely, “clinging to whom?” And then, bizarre as it may sound, not clinging too soon! To illuminate this angle on the cling-question we offer another Easter sermon from sainted Bob Bertram, Crossings founder. Bob preached this one at Lutheran School of Theology in Chicago 15 years ago.

Incidentally, Bob and the last bishop of Rome were born just months apart. I don't think they ever met, even though Bob was a major player in Lutheran-Roman Catholic conversations for many years, the finale of which was the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification, officially signed by both the Vatican and the Lutheran World Federation on Reformation Day 1999. John Paul II called it “a milestone on the difficult path of restoring full unity among Christians.” We'll probably never know just what the bishop of Rome really thought about the Gospel of justification when he said yes to this document. But if it might have been a tad fuzzy for the pontiff—and even Roman Catholic theologians suggest that—possibly now Bob can clarify it for him. Wouldn't we all like to eavesdrop THAT conversation!

In any case here's Bob's case for the Gospel of

justification—though he never uses the term. It's all about Easter and Easter-clinging.

Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

CLINGING FOR DEAR LIFE

John 20:1-18, esp. 13-18

I.

“Do not cling to me.” (Jn. 20:17) So says the risen Christ to Mary Magdalene outside the empty tomb. Not that she should not “touch” him, as the older translations put it. In fact, in the very next scene Jesus literally dares anot her of his folowers TO touch him, nailprints and scar and all. What he is saying to Mary is, Do no hold onto me . . . YET, “because I have not YET ascended to the Father.” His rising was almost completed but not quite. He was risen, you might say, but not yet “risen indeed, hallelujah.” Now, this last moment just before the climax, was no time to hold him back. Not only for his sake but for Mary’s as well. There would soon be time for real clinging, quite bodily clinging. But to cling now, just short of the finish, would be settling for less than the whole resurrection. To cling to only this much Christ was premature, static cling. The risen One was finally out of the woods and on the home stretch, precisely for his clingers. They must not stop him now, so close to home.

Why could Mary Magdalene not let go? For the same reason none of us can. This Christ to whom she clung was, to put it bluntly, a bird in the hand, better than nothing. Let go of

that and you're left empty-handed all over again. Mary Magdalene knew about such emptiness and the cynicism it breeds. At least this risen Jesus in the garden was still her kind of flesh and blood. Who knows what would become of him were he to leave her now and, as he says vaguely, "ascend to the Father"? At least this Christ in Mary's arms was still bodily the way she was, as bodily as her "Rabbuni," as bodily as any garden variety gravedigger or – aye, there's the rub – as bodily as any resurrected Lazarus who could always die again. Still, rather to have and to hold him here and now than to give him up to heaven, wherever that is.

There are whole theologies that think as Mary did. And don't we all? If Christ is in heaven, so we assume, he is not on earth. Or if he is on earth he is here only as divine, "personally" maybe but no longer as one of us. Bread and wine? Sure. But flesh and blood? God with a human body? Here and now, still? In the Lord's Supper? Once he's gone off and "ascended"? That sounds suspiciously like a "line" you've been handed before if you've ever been jilted. Mary Magdalene had reason to cling. But our Lord had better reason for her not to cling, just yet.

P: Christ is risen.

C: He is risen indeed. Hallelujah!

II.

Said the risen Jesus to Mary Magdalene, "I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God." In fact wasn't that how Jesus' Father became also our Father, by Jesus' presenting God with a new offspring: this time a human one, one of us, yet still himself? Christ ascended back to the Father the same divine Son as always, yes, but this time as the divine Son made flesh, our flesh. The Son whom God had earlier sent into the world came back very different from the Son who had left. In the meantime he has become every bit as human as he

always was divine. This was the Son, the evangelist tells us, who had snuggled "in the bosom of the Father." (Jn. 1:18) (How motherly of God to have a bosom.) Faith can imagine God now welcoming the Son back, "My, how you have changed, and really for the better; how like dear Mary Magdalene you now are and like all her dear flesh and blood siblings; on you they look good; any Parent of yours is delighted to be a Parent of theirs."

An old Christian confession urges us to "rejoice without ceasing" because the Christ who now reigns at the right hand of God is "our own flesh and blood." (Formula of Concord 9) That being so, that our kind of earthling has made it all the way to Godhood, we can be sure that that flesh of ours, now deified in Christ, is no longer the old garden variety, biodegradable body that Mary Magdalene was tempted to settle for in the graveyard that morning. That was why the risen Lord urged her not to cling just yet. True, the glorified flesh and blood he now bears is still ours, thank God, but now wondrously recycled through the death of his cross, through his open sepulchre and into the very bloodline of the Trinity. It was a good thing that Mary Magdalene, gutsy believer, let him go when she did. He has never been the same since. Nor has God. Nor have we.

That is why Jesus on Easter morning could now begin calling his disciples his siblings. "Go and tell my brothers," he says to Mary Magdalene, who also would now become his sister. That is the first time in the whole long Gospel of John that Jesus referred to them in that family way. The God to whom he was about to return, but now return as one of them, would thereby become their Parent as well. And they would become God's junior deities and the very Son of God's own blood relatives. It is as if our genes have now become the Designer's genes. Now that is genetic creativity. It is not a question merely of God being a mother but rather of God HAVING a mother, a quite human one,

the same as ours. To be sisters and brothers IN CHRIST is pretty fast company.

P: Christ is risen.

C: He is risen indeed. Hallelujah!

III.

Says the risen Christ to us THIS morning, this risen INDEED Christ, "Take and eat, this is my body," "Take and drink, this is my blood." Now that, sisters and brothers, is definitely an invitation to cling – hands on, touch and taste and swallow and absorb, as bodily as bodily gets. Or as Jesus is quoted in this same Gospel of John, "Anyone who eats this bread will live forever; and the bread that I shall give is my flesh, for the life of the world. . . . Anyone who does eat my flesh and drink my blood has eternal life, and I shall raise [her] up on the last day." (6:51,54)

To THIS flesh and blood, all you dear Magdalenes, dear gutsy believers, feel free to cling – this flesh and blood which has risen not just from death, like Lazarus, but into God and back to us again. For this flesh and blood is no longer terminal like ours. The Eucharist is not cannibalism. This flesh and blood is "for the life of the world," "forever."

THIS body of his IS meant for clinging, for dear life. "Take" it, we are urged. "Take" as in tactile. Take his Word for it but take it for the real and vivifying flesh and blood it is. Take it on faith but take it quite bodily, in to our own eager hands, to our lips, into our weak and mortal bodies. It may come as a shock to the system, but only as life is a shock to death. That is a lot to swallow, but no more than death is when swallowed up by his victory. Take it for what it is worth, our death and resurrection and our joy forever as the offspring of God. Easter morning is happy, yet not as happy as it gets – on

all these mornings after, in the Eucharist. Even that is only a foretaste of the feast to come.

P: Christ is risen.

C: He is risen indeed. Hallelujah!

IV.

This year, 1990, the world (we included) celebrates Earth Day in the same season that we Christians celebrate Easter. That figures. For a God who not only CREATES earth but whose only-begotten BECOMES AN EARTHLING personally and bodily, sharing the earth's curse and death and surviving it still an earthling and still God, and all in order to nurse this poor earth back to health on his own Eastered flesh and blood – such a God must surely qualify as one tough environmentalist.

So ought we not follow suit with a similar godlike love of the environment? Indeed we ought. Still, saying only that much could sound as if we were the centre and everything else were our surroundings. No, we ARE the environment. To God, we are, who IS the centre around whom we gather, we and “the burning sun with golden beam,” (as we shall sing in a moment with Saint Francis) [Lutheran Book of Worship #527] we and the “rushing wind and breezes soft” in this Windy City [=American nickname for Chicago], we and “dear mother earth,” we and “all creatures of our God,” we and even “most kind and gentle death.” We are the environment and God the centre.

Then why do we humans prefer to distance ourselves from the rest of God's environment? Is it merely because we are self-centered? Isn't it rather that we are self-centered because, as Walker Percy puts it, we feel “lost in the cosmos” and so feel threatened by the rest of creation? Yet isn't that also why the eccentric Creator, the very Centre of all, moved out into the periphery with us, taking on our flesh, Christ the earthling?

Ever since, wherever he is home is home enough for us. Over in the hallway outside the seminary mailroom, in the literature rack, is an Earth Day poster which reads, "We are trying to hold onto the earth." Saint Francis might have reworded that: God in Christ IS holding onto the earth, and we therefore, Christ's flesh and blood – we and our kin, the plants and the planets, one earth – have HIM to cling to.

P: Christ is risen.

C: He is risen indeed. Hallelujah!

Robert W. Bertram

Easter, 1990

Crossing Real Life With Easter—In Bangkok, With Terri Schiavo

Colleagues,

Two pieces for the Octave of Easter make up this posting. Both received this Easter weekend from dear friends. Each one "crossing" a slice of life in the world of its author with the Gospel of Easter. Ken Dobson, Presbyterian missionary and college prof, lives and works in Bangkok, Thailand. Ken was our host last year when we were in Southeast Asia on our mission junket. Al Jabs, recently retired Crossings board member, with a distinguished career as college history prof, plus long years of activity on the side of the angels in racially conflicted America (from which he has NOT retired),

lives in Lexington, South Carolina. Peace & Joy
Ed Schroeder

THE TOUCH OF EASTER

I never was much into Easter bunnies. But sixty years or so ago we found Easter candies in little nests made of this and that all around the house. It was how we welcomed Easter morning. Then there was Sunday School at the State Street Presbyterian Church in Jacksonville, and the feature was pansies. Every child in Sunday School got a pansy in a little paper cup. There were lilies for the big people, but they didn't leave as much of an impression as the smiling pansies. It was during the war. Chocolate was scarce...so was sugar. But colored candy Easter eggs and pansies signified all that counted about Easter to an about-to-be five-year-old.

Time has taken me far from Morgan County, Illinois, and I am not expecting to find little nests of colored candy around my house here in ant paradise. I'm into lowered-sugar intake anyway to control weight-gain (since actual weight loss is not happening), in late middle-age, or early old-age, whichever. And here in Thailand Easter is just another Sunday, except for the Christians who seem to be keeping it a secret. The big ceremonies here are sunrise services in the Christian cemeteries, which gives most folks the creeps just thinking about it.

How are we going to tell the Great News that "HE HAS RISEN"? The big question around here, among all the non-Christians, is "Why did he die in the first place?" If Jesus was God, it

doesn't figure. Gods don't have to die. Those that die don't count as top-ranking gods. So we Christians have a public-relations problem with Easter. Last year the gory images of the movie "The Passion of Christ" helped explain the grimmer side of Good Friday, but movies' answer to the big question, "Why?" is the atonement, somebody had to die, so God let Jesus do it.

I read an article about the atonement controversy the other day. The theory says that the Father paid for our sins with the blood of His Son. Women theologians are joining the attack on the atonement theory on the basis that it creates an image of God that is way into violence, advocates blood sacrifices, and justifies torture and death as a way of settling scores. The argument about why Jesus had to die dates back to the beginning. Paul tried to explain it to the Jews; Luke tried to explain it to the Romans, John to the Greeks. But the rationale for Easter hasn't stayed explained. Every generation has had to do it all over again.

Usually we resort to metaphors, symbols, comparisons. "Well, it's like the lilies, see? They look like they're dead, but then one day they break into these wonderful flowers with this fantastic aroma, see?" Or, like the pansies.

Over here in South-East Asia it would be our turn to explain it to the Buddhists and Muslims, if we could find any who were interested. For the most part they are not interested until we catch their attention by some act of generosity or compassion. People are much more interested in the Jesus story after they realize that it is behind the healing touch of the doctors treating their leprosy, the comforting touch of the home-care visitors taking care of their AIDS, the willing touch of the tsumani teams sorting through the corpses and then helping rebuild homes. "You mean you gave up your nice comfortable life to come here and help us deal with this?" "Yes, well, it's a

little like what Jesus did coming down from heaven to help sort things out 2000 years ago." It makes sense, depending on who's saying it and what their hands have been doing to the one listening.

That's how Easter is happening here. How's it happening for you?

Ken Dobson

WHY I SUPPORT THE HUSBAND OF TERRI SCHIAVO

by Dr. Albert E. Jabs

I support the decision of the husband of Terri Schiavo for the following reasons; more importantly, my wife and I had to make that decision back in 1975 when our son, Dirk, was faced with the same dilemma. No one can make that decision without personally agonizing over the person, and particularly so when it is a loved one in the immediate family.

At such a time, you do not know how to pray; therefore, you draw on the intercessory power of the Holy Spirit who utters sighs on our suffering behalf and tht of your loved one. Authentic Christian faith has always acclaimed the power of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ, who broke the power of death and its dominions on earth, below the earth, and even into the universe; this is what the Resurrection really means. Now, back to the Schiavo case.

The Terri Schiavo contention is really about the Resurrection of the dead. If you are part of that Easter enclave that truly believes in the Resurrection of Jesus Christ, then this will motivate your vision of both life and death. This is the primary issue, irrespective of the involvement of the Congress

or the President of the United States. The TV talking heads, of course, are having a feeding frenzy in all of this, but the majority of the psychobabble is devoid of any grasp of what the Christ Resurrection is all about.

Think for a moment about the latest school house slaughter up in Northern Minnesota and remember the Columbine massacre back in 1999; in both tragic instances, we have people who believed more in the power of death, than in the power of Christ's Resurrection. This was also true with the 19 fanatics who hit the Trade Tower in New York. Yes, as it has been stated elsewhere ... we do live in many ways in a culture of death. I am uneasy with the easy abortion rates since the Roe decision. This unease moves me to comment on the 20,000 individuals who died yesterday with disease, poverty, land mines, and other causes.

The blatant cynicism of this world is part of the death culture that thinks it is all right to wink at genocide in the Sudan, international trafficking of women, girls/boys, weapons of mass destruction, and in the general drop of civic discipline. The Pentecostal Power of the Resurrection speaks to all of this. This is Easter Week ... and it is a great time to reflect on this. The Resurrection gives life and salvation because it speaks of the forgiveness of sin. Instead of a world that parodies sin as fun, until it hits with awful death/tragedy, each of us needs to think of our complicity and indifference to the death culture of our times. The corporation profits are obscene when you juxtapose the needs of about 1 million of the desperate, the quiet dying of thousands each day. Where is our trust? Environmental degradation and the stewardship of our precious environment should spur us to conserve the resources of our shrinking globe. The world needs to organize on behalf of the dying minority, as large as the task may seem to be, or as great as our compassion fatigue may be.

The flood of weapons are part of the killing machinery of this world, and people make death profits on this, which is as obscene as those who make profits on the billion dollar pornographic industry. Why, even in my small Lexington County an attempt was made to put profits/poisons over people in pollution issues. In Colossians, it is clearly stated that God has made all things in Jesus Christ, and it is this Christ Resurrection that sustains this shaking world. Yet, alliances and allegiances can be made with exploitative powers that have visions of destructiveness at the core of their hearts. More than ever, we need the witness of each of us, and the Christian church, to share life, salvation, and the Resurrection concerning the Terri Schiavo Case and any other case in this changing, relativistic world.

Therefore, my hope in the Resurrection of Jesus Christ causes me to side with the husband. My wife and I have already made that awful decision in the case of our son, Dirk, who went to heaven at the age of eight years old in 1975. Dear Reader, what is your vision, and what decision would you make . . . and why?

Albert E. Jabs

Rehabilitating Rejects. God's Building Project in Psalm 118, the Psalm appointed for Easter

[PRELIMINARY NOTE: Another voice on the web for law/promise

*theology is the new ezine [=electronic magazine] "The DayStar Journal." Senior Editor: Stephen C. Krueger. Editorial Group: Matthew Becker, David Benke, Eugene Brueggemann, Carol Hannah, Marie Meyer, Jim Rogers, David T. Stein. Some of the ezine team have written ThTh postings in the past. They're on the side of the angels. GO and see their latest issue at: <<http://www.day-star.net/>> Click on DayStar Journal, Vol. 1, issue 2, Lent 2005.]***TODAY'S TOPIC:** "Rehabilitating the Rejects" entails a bit of hagiography, but even so it's a stunning Easter proclamation. It's Bob Bertram's sermon on the psalm appointed for Easter, #118, preached long ago at the Seminex baccalaureate on commencement weekend in May 1979.

Background: During the decade of 1983-93 the Crossings Community offered semester-long courses, usually three each term, taught by Bob and Ed. Each was titled "Crossings From (Biblical book—and then a specific course title)." Eventually we had over 20 such courses in the rotating curriculum. One was "Crossings from the Psalms: What Makes The Rejects Sing?" The focal text was Psalm 118, appointed for Easter in the church lectionary. Bob got hooked by that Psalm (as was Luther, who called it his favorite). He preached more than once on that text during the Seminex decade 1973-83. There were the builders and the rejects, and in varying ways we Seminexers were regularly both.

Bob died in March two years ago. Easter Sunday this year, March 27, is also Bob's birthday. In the year he was born, 1921, March 27 was Easter too! This coming Sunday at the conclusion of the Easter liturgy Bob's ashes will be placed into his niche in the just-completed columbarium of his home congregation, Christ Lutheran Church here in St. Louis. Posting Bob's Easter sermon to you this weekend seemed meet and right – and I know it will be salutary for you.

Peace & joy!

BACCALAUREATE SERMON
WHAT MAKES THE REJECTS SING?
Robert W. Bertram

Grace to you, and peace, from God our Father and from our Lord, Jesus the Christ.

The text for the sermon is from the psalm appointed for Easter Sunday, Psalm 118, the psalm which sets the tone for the whole of this paschal season. It is also the psalm which provides a basis of the new Semtex hymn, which we shall sing immediately after the sermon. The one verse from this psalm which I have chosen as our text, verse twenty-two, is one of the most frequently quoted in the New Testament: "The stone which the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone."

I

This whole song, Psalm 118, is a song for rejects. It is not a song for builders. It is made to be sung only by "the stone whom the builders rejected." It is not made to be sung by the builders who reject the stone. The builders, just because they are builders—constructive, cautiously choosy, practical realists—have to discard that stone. For he, this strange stone, is bound to misfit their building and to undermine plans and programs and budgets. Yet he is the very stone whom the Lord, who builds so exasperatingly differently, turns right around and reinstates as the cornerstone—thus vetoing the builders. That is why the builders are not allowed to sing the Lord's song. In this whole song, in all twenty-nine verses,

there is not one line which the builders get to sing. Not one line for them even to hum along or to whistle. The whole uproarious song from beginning to end is for the exclusive fun of those whom the lofty builders had mistakenly thought were the misfits, the undesirables, the expendables. Theirs is the final song. And those who excluded them, the very builders who had thought they were orchestrating the liturgy and assigning the parts and calling the tune, are themselves tuned out.

The builders—who are they? “They?” No, not “they.” You! “YOU builders” is the way the apostle Peter quotes this song in the Book of Acts. “The Stone which was despised by YOU builders,” says Peter, now turning the ancient song directly against the members of his own religious community, its leading members at that—the seminary-trained, certified, ordained builders of the ecclesiastical establishment (Acts 4:11), “You builders.” Sure enough, we may say (still not getting the point), it was they all right, those same Jewish clergy whom Jesus himself had condemned for rejecting the stone. (Mt. 21:42; Mk. 12:10,11; Lk. 20:17) Right, it was they. But the point, friends, is that those “they”—as you and I conveniently refer to them—were, for Jesus, his face-to-face audience whom he addressed as “you” (Y-O-U), his own present company. And this morning in this church his present company is YOU, “you builders,” you and I.

How offensive it must sound for me to level such a sharp criticism against us. That we are the churchly builders—that we can understand. After all, isn’t that our special vocation? But to use our vocation as builders against us and to say that, precisely in the course of our duties as spiritual leaders, we are most prone to reject the Stone—that does seem insolent, not to mention ungrateful. I suppose that is how the priests and the scribes reacted, too, when they were criticized by Peter and Jesus. Even Martin Luther, who as you know was not easily shocked, did find it incredible that this psalm (his favorite)

should make the accusation it does, namely, that the ones who reject the Stone are, of all people, the community's and the very church's own "builders"—those leaders, as Luther remarks, who "edify and improve and govern for the good of the people by preaching and teaching." Notice, Luther marvels, the psalm does not call them "destroyers, wreckers or bunglers," as we might expect. On the contrary, "they are the builders, the most necessary, the most useful and the best people on earth."

Finally, Luther does concede that, since there must be those who persecute the Gospel, it would have to be the builders who must do it. "Who else would do it?" he asks.

"No one else can. If there is to be persecution, they must do it; for they are the builders. They do it 'ex officio.' For they must see to it that their building has no crack, rent or disfiguration. Therefore they cannot tolerate the Word of God or those who declare it."

And why not? Why, because "such a person [who does declare the Word] disfigures their building. . . . He is [to them] a rabble-rouser who misleads their people. . . . His way of doing things is entirely different from theirs." When Luther himself had to direct this criticism against the builders of his own church—namely, that they too were rejecting the Stone—they responded in a way I would expect, and in a way I expect I would, too. "What do you mean," they replied, "do you think we are heathen or Jews?" So they had to reject this new rabble-rouser as well.

My fellow builders, I ask you, please, not to resent this brisk warning to us all. The building trade you and I are in, especially we church professionals, is a treacherously hazardous occupation, and deeply incriminating. You newcomers, the graduates, have every reason to approach this vocation with

fear and trembling. For just look at the stones we builders reject—the stones we may even think we have to reject, ‘ex officio’—in order to do the church’s building. For instance, at the moment many of us may be most intent upon building our new ministerial careers or, if we are faculty, rebuilding old careers which suddenly seem threatened. In that anxious process of career building our own classmates may suddenly begin to look like competitors, or our faculty colleagues might, in view of the scarcity of job opportunities. We are tempted to distinguish among our associates between those stones who are still useful to us and those who no longer fit into our career plans—the unimportant stones, the expendables, those who might disfigure our building. But our leaving them behind, embarrassing as that may be for us, can still always be excused as inevitable or even as positively constructive so long as we can rationalize (as we do) that these careers we are building are not only for ourselves but (and here is the magic word) for “the ministry.” It does seem to stand to reason then that whatever stones happen to get in the way of such a noble cause will of course have to be eased aside or stepped over—all for the good of our ministries.

The expendable stones become still more expendable when what we are building is not merely personal ministries but some structure more objective, more institutional than that, like whole congregations or whole seminaries or whole new church bodies. Then the top priority must go toward building what we call a support system. For those stones who do not support the system or, worse yet, who criticize it, there simply can be no room in the system. Too bad, but they will have to fall by the way—even old friends and fellow-Christians. However, nowhere in the whole church is there a building project which so righteously sorts out the bad stones as does that project which we call “taking a stand,” “making a confessional witness.” That

method of ridding ourselves of bad stones can be made to seem not only justified but downright heroic. That sort of weeding out we may even be able to pull off with a good conscience. In fact, we may swear that if we had it all to do over again, we would still have to do it the same way, let the stones fall where they may. And we would probably be right. And they would still be wrong.

So what? So what if those stones are wrong, and we builders are dead right in displacing them? So what does that prove about us, for all our rightness? Do we imagine for one moment that that entitles us builders to sing this song to the Lord, a song he reserves exclusively for rejects? Have we forgotten that those same stones whom we discard, no matter how justifiedly, are themselves free at any moment to appeal beyond our rejection of them and to cry to the Lord for pity? Doesn't he, regardless of their wrong and of our right, have a special ear for pleas like theirs? Doesn't he come to their rescue and take their side? And when he does, my fine builders, where do you suppose that puts you and me? Right, that puts us on the wrong side—us, the dead right ones, now on the wrong side—working against considerably unfavorable odds, considering who the rejects' new ally is. That is hardly conducive to our singing.

Then where does it get us to protest that, after all, we are only doing our duty as builders, true as that may be? Still, what kind of duty could that possibly be when God himself has to override and reverse it in order to recover those casualties whom we in our duty leave behind? What good can it possibly do us then to prove that those stones whom we discard—those what's-their-names, many of whom we may even have forgotten—really are misfit or really are wrong or really superfluous, all of which they just might be? For what if, besides being misfit, they have in the meantime also been put to shame and to inconvenience and to hardship and forgottenness

and, out of that sorry experience, have learned no longer to stake their lives upon us builders but now instead upon the Lord? What then? well, you can read the psalm as well as I. Where does it ever say that the reason the Lord takes their side is that they are innocent or that they are sufficiently sorry or that they deserve a second chance? No, what the psalm does say, unmistakably, is that the Lord takes their side because builders like you and me do not, and because they, our rejects, now turn to him as their only recourse. Which suddenly puts you and me up against rather sizable opposition.

Can you imagine, in face of the rejects' new and prestigious coalition, that their rejectors, the dead right builders, would still be presumptuous enough to horn in on the singing? And if the uninvited builders would persist in singing the song anyway or, worse yet, would try to direct the song, can you imagine how their unwanted singing would come across at the other end? Paul [Manz, organist], could you please demonstrate how under those circumstances the builders' singing must sound? (Silence) Exactly.

II

Well, then, if what gives us a voice in the Lord's song is not that we are builders, if on the contrary our building activities may actually prejudice our being heard at all, then what part in the singing is left to us? Would you believe: the STONES' part, the part of the rejects? That one qualification—that dubious, unflattering qualification—we do happen to have, as the stones whom other builders reject. At least most of us here this morning do. At the same time that we at Seminex have been trying to promote our own building project within the church, we ourselves are also being discarded at the hands of still other churchly builders. In fact, we often build as aggressively as we do because in large part there are those other builders who evidently have no room for us stones in

their building. There would be no need of Seminex, you graduates would not need to scramble for calls the way you do, nor we for students or funding, nor the AELC for congregations, nor Missouri moderates for direction, and this morning's service would all be quite different, were it not for the fact—the still very present fact—of our exclusion. We, especially you graduates, do know something about being expendable.

Let me quickly explain, however, that that fact of our ecclesiastical rejectedness is just that, a fact. It is not a reason for us to pity ourselves, nor is it something to be cocky about. Nevertheless, as the psalm assures us, our exclusion does provide us with an exceptional opportunity, the opportunity to appeal for ultimate Help. Our very exclusion by others drives home how desperately we need to look beyond the builders, any builders, for our help and to look only to that one wild Builder beyond them all who has a special eye for discards and who alone can make a silk purse out of a sow's ear. Being at the bottom of the heap is not the worst place to be. True, as we said, it also is no virtue. Nor is it, by itself, a tragedy. But being down, there is after all only one direction left in which to look, only One to whom to raise our voices.

"Out of our distress [we] called on the Lord; he answered [us] and set [us] free." (v.5)

That angle of sound does something for the quality of the singing. If you don't know what it is like to sing from way down here—especially, together—then you also don't know the fun of being listened to and applauded from way up there. Forget about the martyrdom, also the false heroics. Who needs it? I mean, who needs THAT when what we really need is infinitely more than that? What we need is nothing less than a divine

rescue. But being for once in a position to acknowledge that, being able at last to cry for really big help, and to cry for it from the One who majors in giving it—that does have its own kind of exhilaration. An old German proverb says “hunger is the best cook.” Also, we might add, it does wonders for one’s singing.

Ultimately, there is really only one reason that being down is an advantage. (Not down and out, just down.) Only one thing can make being down worthwhile. Without that one thing, “the one thing needful,” we degenerate into masochism or what is just as silly, whistling in the dark. It is only because down here, at the bottom, we are in the best of company that therefore we can make the most of it. It is only because down here is where HE companies with us, the original Reject with the other misfits, that we can find one Cornerstone to lean upon who won’t ever give way. Down here is where HE comes, not the god with the builder mentality, merely a god-of-the-good and the right, but the God rather who finally descends beneath all such nosy questions about rightness and wrongness and simply stoops to our condition so as to raise us back to his. The only thing good about being down is that that is where the sepulchre is, his sepulchre, which opens up to Easter and the life which lasts—and does so every day over.

“[We] shall not die but live, and recount the deeds of the Lord. The Lord has chastened [us] sorely, but he has not given [us] over to death.” (vv.17-18)

In any other connection, except in connection with him, that would sound maudlin or like phony theatrics. WITH him, being down is just the flip-side of being Eastered and exalted to the Lord’s right hand.

There will still be times galore when you will find it hard to

accept being lowly stones rather than lofty builders, and you simply won't believe that such a low estate can be so close to resurrection. On the other hand, there are already many of you, I notice, who hardly seem to need any other footing beneath you, any other support system, than that Cornerstone who himself came from the bottom of the heap. Apparently because of him, his everlasting arms, you no longer need to do your tightrope acts over a net. You are not as beset as some of us builders still are with "the wing-walker's syndrome": not letting go of one strut until you've got hold of the next. You don't seem to panic, builder-like, when there's no special niche reserved for you within the organization's buildings. I am thinking of you faculty and staff persons—three in particular—who are volunteering to step out of your accustomed jobs. I am thinking of you beautiful retirees who have been traveling light for all the rest of us. I am thinking of our new breed of church leaders, those synod bishops and Seminex administrators who even when they have to be builders remember all the more to be stones. I am thinking especially of you Seminex graduates and of the graduating classes before you who go out from here but without any very visible support—except for him who dies for us and rose again. The rest of us are watching you and taking note, for when our own turn comes. I seem to recall your password, "He is risen indeed."

There are rumors afoot that Seminex is scheduled to die soon, rumors born more of wish than of fact. There are other rumors, which are probably more factual, that Seminex is committed to survive indefinitely. Both rumors, however, commit the same fallacy. They both assume that in order for us to keep the song going, in order for us (as the psalm says) to "recount the deeds of the Lord," we simply have to have the support and approval of the builders. Both sorts of rumor commit the same unbelief, namely, that in order for us to "not die but live" we

have to build as the builders build. The truth is, however—the whole secret of the song is—in ultimately not NEEDING the builders' kind of building, not a seminary, not career-building, not even a denomination, but needing only him who can build with the oddest shaped materials the most extraordinary church you ever did see. That opportunity I believe we shall continue to enjoy. In the process we may even rouse a little rabble.

Now, as for the song, let's hear it from you misfits. Mark [Bangert, choirmaster], Paul [Manz], trumpets and all—take it away.