

Homosexuality and Creation Theology

Colleagues,

Not everybody was pleased with last week's critique (ThTh 352) of those 17 prominent theologians urging the ELCA to reject what the sexuality taskforce proposed.

Samples:

Sorry Ed, but I think you may have gone a bit too far—from a guy who was “liberal” until about a year ago.

I find the whole process fails the double-dipstick test, including to some extent the critique given by Tim, because it fails to name the shortcoming of both poles/ parties (those desiring “change,” those desiring “enforcement of the policy”). Both poles want Christ-AND something.

Looks to me like ‘Crossings’ theology has come adrift from the revelation given to the Apostles. Antinomian teaching Ed, I would say. Sad to see THE gospel abandoned “so quickly” (Gal. 1:6). Only this time, it is not a reversion to Judaism's Culture, but to Western Culture.

[Comment: Both libs and non-libs have said no to the hermeneutics being used on this issue in ThTh postings. So ours must be a third option. Which it is. Neither of them is interested in Gospel-grounding. That makes all the difference. Seems to us similar to Luther's third option in his day between the “fundie” establishment and the wild revolutionaries—all of whom hyped the Bible, but no law-promise hermeneutics for how to read it. The “theology of freedom”—in three recent ThTh postings (346, 349, 350)—arises from the same hermeneutics that Hoyer was

using last week. If one leads to “gospel abandoned,” then both do. But our claim is: on the contrary, both are the consequences of gospel-grounding. So if you liked the freedom theology, then(fill in the blank).]

One of you, who seemed not displeased, said: “It’s all about God the creator. If God does indeed create some people homo, some hetero, the debate is over.” Well, maybe. But that got me into the C.S. Lewis mood of fantasy, “a fanciful design or invention.” Not that the ghost of CSL has to worry about any competition. Narnia is in no danger.

An imagined scenario.

Scene: Judgment day.

God speaking: Just in case you didn’t notice—I create stuff via “big bang” (explosion outward) and “black-hole” (implosion inward). Just as I create matter and antimatter. Bodies and antibodies. Gravity and antigravity. Type and anti-type (one of St. Paul’s favorites). North poles and south poles. Magnetism and anti-magnetism. Electricity that flows this way, electricity that runs that way. Ditto for sexual electricity in the human images of myself—some people wired hetero, some wired homo. Paradox, you say in English: “seemingly contradictory or opposed to popular opinion, yet nevertheless true.”

That’s my style of creating. Anomalies to you, “deviating from the norm,” but not to me. Perhaps your God is too small.

And some of you straight folks call the homo folks defective, degenerate, sinners, and even worse names. I take that as a personal affront. Your problem is not with the gays and lesbians—their morality or lack thereof. That’s on the surface, literally, super-ficial. Your deep problem (D-3, they call it in

the Crossings paradigm) is with me their creator—and your creator too. The depth diagnosis of your hang-up with homosexual people is a God-problem. You disapprove of what I do. Your enmity finally lands at my front door, me your creator. That's the way I see it.

Didn't you ever read the Bible? I'm not talking about those dicey passages you always talk about on this issue when you say: But the Bible says . . . (see my comments below). I'm talking about Isaiah (29:16), "Shall the potter be regarded as the clay? Shall the thing made say of its maker . . . the thing formed say of him who formed it, 'He has no understanding?'" Or later (45:9ff), "Woe to him who strives with his Maker, an earthen vessel with the potter! Does the clay say to him who fashions it, 'What are you making'? or 'Your work has no handles'? [It's defective. You botched.] Woe to him Thus says the LORD, the Holy One of Israel, and his Maker: 'Will you question me about my children, or command me concerning the work of my hands?'"

St. Paul cites this text as he copes (Romans 9-11) with his #1 personal paradox that God's chosen people rejected God's own Messiah. He concludes chapter 11: "How unsearchable are God's judgments and how inscrutable his ways! For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his advisor?"

Paradoxes, anomalies, that you earthlings cannot figure out? That's my style. Homo and hetero too.

Didn't it ever register with you that Hitler designated homosexuals as the #2 group of "degenerates" to be shlepped off with the Jews to Auschwitz? Have YOU no understanding?

Interlude. No fantasy. This really happened.

Couple of summers ago Marie and I were on our way to the 50th anniversary gathering of her graduation class from St. John's College, Winfield, Kansas. Driving southwest out of St. Louis on Interstate-44, we stopped to eat our brought-along lunch at a rest stop. Over at the next table was a family doing likewise. As both groups headed back to our cars, which happened to be parked next to each other, I got into conversation with Jim, the family father. With a few exchanges I learned that he was a Montana rancher in the summertime and a high school guidance counselor in Alaska(!) during the school year. And born-again Christian.

I told him that I too was a Christian and that I'd been only once to Montana, where I actually witnessed a dinosaur-dig under the direction of superstar dinosaur digger Jack Horner. "Na," said Jim, "I know they're there, but I don't believe that millions and billions of years stuff. That Grand Canyon, for instance. I know from experience how fast erosion can work. Millions of years for the Grand Canyon? Nonsense. A couple thousand years, that's all. We creationists know better."

So I said: "Jim, suppose that on Judgment Day as we stand side-by-side before Jesus, he looks straight at you and says: 'Jim, it really was millions and millions of years.' What will you say?"

Said Jim: "Na, that won't happen. I'll give him a hundred thousand. But no more."

Back to imaginings—

So who will be in charge on judgment day? The pot or the potter? Who is already "in charge" of patterning creation? Cracked-pots giving backtalk to the potter wind up as smashed pots. Better would be not to wait that long before granting the potter his

prerogatives.

That's the grim picture in the last parable that Jesus tells in Matthew 25. Those whom we heteros may designate the "least" get Christ's kudos—"my siblings." And those who treat these siblings as nobodies—or even worse—do also get an evaluative word from Christ: "Depart from me you cursed . . . "

Homo-hasslers have a God-problem, and the end of the line is the opposite of the word "blessed." Here too God runs both (seemingly contradictory) operations.

God continuing:

And about those verses in Leviticus. Have you ever read that book? All those awful kill, kill, kill mandates—and the holocaust prescriptions for what the Israelites should do when they got to Canaan? What kind of a God do you really believe I am? Yes, I kill and I make alive. But I don't authorize any one people to exterminate another people, anymore than I authorized Hitler to murder Jews and homosexuals. Baal authorizes such stuff. And I get "Baal-ized" by my own people all over the place in the O.T. Also here in Leviticus. Which is why I sent all those prophets. "I Yahweh am 'holy' [root meaning: different]. Not like the sacrifice-bingeing Baal bunch. And you my people shall be different too. In the same way. Just like me." But in vain. So finally I sent my own Son. Talk about being different! Paradoxical! And you are his disciples. Well then...

And all that sacrifice stuff? Didn't you ever hear what my beloved Son said (quoting Hosea): "I (God) desire mercy, not sacrifice." Do you think I mandated all that sacrifice stuff? Who inserted that into the OT? Did I consent?

If I am against sacrifice-stuff (remember, Jesus said so too), then don't expect to find much of me in Leviticus. How could THIS God have authorized Levitical theology— and the similar

kind of God-talk in Numbers? Luther had such an “Aha!” when he called Leviticus the “Juden-Sachsenspiegel”—Jewish civil law, no more universal than the civil law of Saxony. And surely not, he insisted, God’s law FOR US Christians now living in Saxony. Incidentally, Luther also caught on to my penchant for paradox in my workings in the world: deus absconditus, deus revelatus. Seemingly contradictory, yet true.

Dare I say this? Leviticus-theology with its focus on extermination—at the altar, in the courtroom, on the battlefield—is a priestly power-politics forgery inserted into MY scriptures. It is against my will and is prima facie evidence of the unending repetition of clergy takeover (and eventual destruction) of my people. Jesus here too is my last word “against” such clergy tyranny. So he “cleanses” the temple of its clergy-tyranny and puts himself in its place. Mercy, not sacrifice. If that sounds shocking, read Matthew 23. Every word from the mouth of Jesus.

And God continuing:

About those two Greek words in the NT that some of you render in English with “homosexual,” did you ever think of this possibility? Malakos (literally, softie) refers to fat folks, obesity, gluttony. That’s the sin Paul is condemning. And there’s lot of that going around today in the Western world. It’s a no-no. I’m agin it! And the other word: arsenokoites (literally, male-bed-persons) refers to guys who stay in bed and don’t get up to work in the morning. Parallel Pauline text is: Whoever will not work, neither shall he eat. I’m agin such folks too!

Here endeth Ed’s fantasy. But not quite this posting.

Summa:

And then the judge (this time it’s Jesus) will say: Insofar as

you did not give automatic full-acceptance to these people whom God created homo, you were doing so to me. Your hang-up with homos is a GOD-issue, a false-god issue, an idolatry issue. Check Matt. 25:46 for the (un)grande finale of this. It is nothing blessed.

The homo hassle among Christians is all about theology of creation, some of us pots giving orders for what the potter may or may not do. How far away is that from the serpent's primal pitch in Gen. 3? We're acting like mini-gods ourselves, "knowing what's good and evil by our own criteria," and then having the chutzpah to give instructions to the De Facto Deity on what is kosher and not kosher to create. "I'll give him a hundred thousand. But no more. I'll give him heteros, but not homos. No way."

How near or far is this precipice from where all of us are standing as the hetero-homo-hullabaloo roars on? Yet even for us, the Precipice-rescuer comes in cross and resurrection. The result is a new creation even more "unsearchable and inscrutable" than the continuing "old" creation. What is not inscrutable at all, however, is his offer: "Hear my voice. Follow me!" It's really that simple.

And therefore Peace & joy!

Ed Schroeder

P.S. Some corollaries-

1. CREATION

The "orders of creation" is a mis-translation for what in Luther's theology were the "creator's ordainings." Not any fixed blueprints laid down in Genesis 1, but God-creator ordaining the distinctive specs of my personal life (yours too, quite different from mine). What Lutherans are talking about when they recite Luther's First Article

catechism text: "I believe that God has made me linked to all creatures, has given me my body, soul, eyes, ears"... etc. (the whole laundry list of some dozen or more of the God-given unique specs that make me me). Also some homo, some hetero.

2. MALADY

All heteros, all homos, come under the sinner-rubrics of Augsburg Art. 2. "Since the fall of Adam [N.B. "since" not "because"] all humans are born in sin." But neither "h" word predisposes us to be sinner or non-sinner. The sin specs are "not fearing God, not trusting God, and being curved into one's own self." Here there is absolute equality—homo and hetero—and all fall.

3. REMEDY

Consequently "there is no distinction, since all have sinned, and fall short of giving God the appropriate glory; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus . . . effective through faith" (Rom 3:22ff.)

4. LIFESTYLE

And as you "confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the Glory of God the Father . . . work out YOUR OWN salvation with fear and trembling." (Phil. 2:11f.) And if you need help (and who doesn't), ask a Christ-sib for it. Note well—YOUR OWN salvation. Devote your fear and trembling to the salvation agenda God has assigned to you. Resist appropriating someone else's. If and when you're asked to help co-confessors with their agendas, "always be ready to give a reason [lit. in Greek: give the word] for the hope that is in you." (1Peter 3:15) Which brings all of us back to Good Friday and Easter. It's really that simple.

Homosexuality. Demonic Diversion from Gospel Mission and Ministry Today

Colleagues,

My framing the topic above so sharply will come as no surprise to regular readers. The battle to get homo-hetero-deck-chairs on the Titanic rightly arranged is heating up. World-wide Anglicanism is in chaos on this one, so Anglican friends tell us. Some even say “death-throes.” And the homo-hetero-hullabaloo in the ELCA right now is not far behind. Wasn’t it just yesterday in the ELCA that we thought the family fight was about requiring historic episcopal presence at clergy ordinations, so that we be congruent partners with the Episcopal Church USA [ECUSA], the Anglican presence in our midst? But now we have other glue that binds both denominations—in a very sticky wicket. The homo/hetero hassle. Seems to me it’s a “Tar Baby and Br’er Rabbit” story. The more you poke at it, the more immobilized you get. There are other metaphors. Rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic. Fiddling while Rome burns. Or Jesus’ own imagery: “Woe to you scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! You tithe the mint, dill and cummin, while neglecting the weightier matters of justice, mercy and faith.” (Matt. 23:23) Was he talking about us? I think so.

What are the big antitheses to the Christian Gospel’s “justice, mercy and faith” in the USA today?

It’s not homo/hetero. Is it not the plethora of other gospels pounding into our ears? [And I’ll use “-ism” to signal their

pseudo-Gospel pitch for us to trust them.] Hedonism (our pleasure society across the board), national imperialism (re-creating the whole world in our own image), just plain capitalism, which hypes “enough is just a little bit more,” in an “ownership” society. [Au contraire the Bible’s “tenancy” society—i.e., managing “in trust” the planetary goods of the Real Owner according to that owner’s management model.] And many more “principality and power” proposals urging us to trust them for life. Those aren’t mint, dill or cummin. They’re other gospels.

That’s just thinking of a few other gospels down-home . What about global ones? For instance, just this one: What about Islam as a growing missionary-minded religion, world-wide, with now something like one billion adherents? Also growing within the USA, where Islam, now with more adherents than Judaism, is the #2 religion in America. That’s hardly a mint, dill or cummin item either.

Where are the national or international church task forces at work to aid Christians in the hard face of these icebergs? Not only for assistance in exorcizing the home-brand false gospels from the turf they already occupy in our own hearts, but also for strategies on offering the real Good News in the mish-mash of all these altars surrounding us on the Mars Hills of today? Where are such church-wide task forces? Nowhere that I know of—and surely not anywhere near the top of denominational agendas nowadays. Yet those are the icebergs that will scuttle our church-wide Titanics—even if we did finally get the homo/hetero deck-chairs rightly arranged.

But homo/hetero is the church-wide agenda that ELCAers and ECUSAers are stuck with right now. What to do?

Timothy Hoyer, today’s guest writer, pastor of Gloria Dei

Lutheran Church (ELCA) in Jamestown, New York, has a proposal: If deck-chair scramble is what's given us, let's start there and still help folks survive even on the Titanic. If that's the lemon we're given, how to make lemonade? Timothy's thoughts come in response to a new tar-baby poke in the ELCA, a March 1 statement by 17 ELCA theologians saying no—three times no—to the ELCA task force report on sexuality. Timothy's theological/pastoral axiom is simple: When confronting anything less than Gospel in theological statements, proclaim THE gospel. Below you have the statement of the 17, and thereafter Timothy's alternative.

Peace & joy!

Ed Schroeder

A STATEMENT OF PASTORAL AND THEOLOGICAL CONCERN A RESPONSE TO THE REPORT AND RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE TASK FORCE FOR ELCA STUDIES ON SEXUALITY

We are grateful to every member of the Task Force for their time, commitment, and effort, and accept the invitation welcoming the “prayers, responses, and admonitions of all our partners.” In response to that request, and based on our careful review of the Report and its recommendations, we maintain that the third and primary recommendation of the Task Force, contrary to its stated intention, threatens to destabilize the unity and constitution, as well as the historical, biblical, and confessional teachings and practice of this church. Further, this final proposal places the first two, although in principle containing some assertions that are indeed admirable and commendable, into an interpretative

context that makes them objectionable as well.

The most conspicuous logical inconsistency in the Task Force's Report is that in the name of a "no change in policy" it advocates a fundamental shift in policy. It asks the church "to refrain from disciplining those who . . . call or approve partnered gay or lesbian candidates whom they believe to be otherwise in compliance with Vision and Expectations and to refrain from disciplining those rostered people so approved or called" (7). Unable to make a recommendation that would resolve the issue of gay/lesbian ordination and/or blessings through legislative action based on Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions, the Task Force proposes that permission for such activities be granted on the basis of "conscience" and a "pastoral approach" in lieu of the traditional criteria employed by this church. This proposal, in our view, suffers from several flaws. We offer the following theological observations:

Ecclesiology

By using the language of "this approach" (8) instead of "this change in policy" the Task Force advocates that the ELCA should "trust congregations, synods, candidacy committees, and bishops to discern the Holy Spirit's gifts for ministry among the baptized and make judgments appropriate to each situation"(8). In the New Testament, however, the criterion for the discernment of the gifts of the Holy Spirit is a broadly based, ecclesial determination and not an individual, local preference. If the Report before us were to be implemented, the ELCA, as a national church body, would abdicate its theological and moral constitutional responsibility by relegating the decisions for which it alone is responsible to regional and local components. Far beyond transforming the polity of the ELCA into a congregational one, such an action would so fatally

extend the boundaries of diversity in matters of doctrinal and ethical substance that this church would no longer be an effective collaborator either in the communio of the Lutheran World Federation or in the multiple dimensions of ecumenical dialogue. The proposed shift of matters of such enormous import from the national to the local levels will have two adverse consequences: 1. structural dissolution of the ELCA as it currently exists, and; 2. creation of intense division and disunity at the local level, thus effectively undermining “ways to live together faithfully in the midst of our disagreements” (5).

Conscience

The Task Force imposes a subjective understanding of “conscience,” one bound only by private judgment, upon Scripture and Luther, thus misrepresenting both. Whenever conscience severs itself from faith in Christ and fidelity to the Word it is no longer conscience in the true sense. Indeed, some in the Corinthian church wanted to solve their disagreements by applying precisely such a therapeutic model of conscience, an approach that Paul unequivocally rejects. Weak consciences, led into error by social pressures and alien ideologies, can never be ultimately determinative sources of truth or unity. For Luther, the holy and righteous conscience of the Christian must agree with God’s Word; an erring conscience, separated from Scripture, can react only in accordance with selfish desires resulting from weakness in faith.

Pastoral Care

In Scripture the term “pastor” is never dissociated from the standard of sound teaching. Much like the term “conscience,” “pastoral concern” must be governed by that which is righteous

and holy in the eyes of God. "Pastoral concern" is not a neutral category and cannot, therefore, be determinative in discerning the correctness of actions or behavior. Since pastors can either teach sound or false doctrine, Titus is urged to "teach what is consistent with sound doctrine." Neither Scripture nor the Confessions entrust the theological or ethical teaching of the church to pastoral "discretion" (5). In listening to the contemporary "voices of the baptized children of God" (9) we cannot and must not disregard the voices of the church universal over the past two millennia; Scripture can never address us independently from that communal history.

CONCLUSION

For the reasons given we urge that all three recommendations of the Task Force be rejected since, if adopted, they would alter fundamentally the ecclesiology of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and that, in turn, would threaten not only the unity and stability of this church but, as a consequence, its ability to proclaim the truth of the Gospel.

[Seventeen signatures. All prominent professorial names in the ELCA. About half a dozen from the "old" ALC, another half dozen or so from the "old" LCA, and a couple more whose provenance I do not know. ehs]

March 1, 2005

A Response to "A STATEMENT OF PASTORAL AND THEOLOGICAL CONCERN"

The assumption is that if there are seventeen of them, namely theologians, then people should listen to their statement. And

since they are big name Lutheran Theologians in the ELCA, then the ELCA should pay attention. But no statement has authority in churches of the Augsburg Confession, such as the ELCA, unless it is Gospel-grounded in the authority that comes from Christ, which is that we are justified by faith in Christ alone.

Over and over again in the Lutheran Confessions, to make sure that authority of Christ is present in any theological statement, two questions are asked—one about Christ, the other about his intended beneficiaries. Here is how the two questions are used in Apology of the Augsburg Confession in Article 4, Justification, “. . . this controversy deals with the most important topic of Christian teaching which, rightly understood, illumines and magnifies the honor of Christ [that’s question #1] and brings the abundant consolation that devout consciences need” [#2] (Book of Concord, Wengert/Kolb, 120-121.2). Either Christ is illumined and consciences consoled, or the teaching of justification is contaminated and you “obscure the glory and benefits of Christ, and tear away from devout consciences the consolation offered them in Christ” (ibid., 121.3).

To easily remember and refer to those two questions, they were given the nickname the “double-dipstick,” [a Semtex shibboleth (ehs)] and they are used to test anything that claimed to be Christian. 1) Do Christ’s merits and benefits get used or wasted? 2) Does it give the benefits of Christ to people so their consciences are comforted?

Those two questions are the two measuring sticks the Reformers use throughout The Book of Concord. And the Reformers got those two questions from the eyewitnesses of Christ who got it from Christ, the one who died and rose from the dead for the salvation of all people. The death and rising of Jesus is the

reason the first question is asked. The salvation of all people is the reason the second question is asked.

The statement of the seventeen theologians is concerned that the Recommendations of the Task Force of the ELCA on Human Sexuality threaten “the historical, biblical, and confessional teachings and practices of this church.” Their statement bases the feelings of threat on what the recommendations of the Task Force do to ecclesiology, conscience, and pastoral care. There is no mention of justification by faith in Christ alone. There is no mention of the death and rising of Christ, and no mention of giving the benefits of Christ to people so their consciences are comforted. That fails the double-dipstick test.

The supposed threat to ecclesiology is that the national church would abdicate “its theological and moral constitutional responsibility relegating the decisions for which it alone is responsible to regional and local components.” And it would “fatally extend the boundaries of diversity in matters of doctrinal and ethical substance” so that the ELCA could no longer collaborate in The Lutheran World Federation and other dimensions of ecumenical dialogue.

However, every congregation is responsible to proclaim to people that all are justified by faith in Christ alone. Every Christian person is called to give Christ’s forgiveness and love to others. The authority of the gospel is not in the number of theologians but in the forgiveness Christ offers people. Thus, even only one person proclaiming that Christ forgives people is greater than all other powers, dominions, hierarchical structures, and constitutions. The objection fails the double-dipstick test.

The imposition on the conscience is that it will be severed from “faith in Christ and fidelity to the Word.” The

conscience, say the seventeen theologians, “must agree with God’s Word.” However, the conscience is comforted by Christ’s forgiveness alone and not by fidelity to God’s Word. (Here “God’s Word” means the whole Bible—law and gospel, especially those passages about this topic of human sexuality.) But that sort of Bible usage also fails the double-dipstick test.

The “must” in their statement, because it is applied to consciences, is significant. Christian consciences are not subject to a coercive “must,” but are freed to live in the forgiveness of Christ (Galatians 5). If consciences are subjected to a “must,” then the gift of the benefits of Christ are contaminated and obscured, and no comfort is given, another failure of the double-dipstick test.

The seventeen theologians write that “pastoral concern must be governed by that which is righteous and holy in the eyes of God,” which has been voiced by “the church universal over the past two millennia.” This is a vague allusion to the church teaching for the past two thousand years that homosexuality is sinful. But that too fails the double-dipstick test. It fails because pastoral concern has been freed by Christ forgiving all people so that they in turn get to give (out of pastoral concern) Christ’s forgiveness and love to all others. Also, the phrase, “that which is righteous and holy in the eyes of God,” is a Christian statement and so is to be defined by the double-dipstick. When defined by the double-dipstick, “that which is holy and righteous in the eyes of God” is faith in Christ, as Paul testifies in Romans 3, “the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe.”

The church gets to do the work Christ has given it, namely, to proclaim forgiveness in his name. When the church proclaims that Christ forgives people, then the church has the ability to proclaim, not the “truth of the Gospel,” but the Gospel itself,

the forgiveness that Christ gives to all by his death on a cross and rising from the dead. All who trust Christ are the church (ecclesiology), have their consciences at peace with God because of Christ, and they give the pastoral care of forgiveness from Christ. This way of talking (using Christ's benefits to comfort consciences) about ecclesiology, conscience, and pastoral care, was once the yardstick for what qualified as Lutheran. The statement of the seventeen really needs to go back to using Christ so that he is glorified and consciences are comforted with Christ's benefits.

Timothy Hoyer

[FYI. Pastor Hoyer writes the lead article in the upcoming Easter edition of the Crossings print-medium newsletter. Shortly after publication it will also be available on the Crossings website. Should you want to see it sooner, contact the Crossings office to get a copy. <info@crossings.org> (ehs)]

Database Theology

Colleagues,

Today's guest contributor is Nathan Schroeder. He's part of the Crossings team. He manages the Crossings listserve. Apparently he also reads the stuff that gets posted. He and his wife Ellen are parents of our three oldest grandchildren. Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

Database Theology A few months ago, Bethel's adult education class [at Bethel Lutheran Church, St. Louis MO] was doing a series on theories of atonement. When we discussed the idea that Christ had to die because God demands death as a consequence of sin, one person rejected that idea because she couldn't believe in a "vengeful" God that would make such a demand. I worked out another model in which Christ indeed had to die because death is a necessary consequence of sin, but not because of God's vengefulness. This model is based on my professional work; let me share part of it with you.

I am a computer programmer; I design and build data processing systems. As such, I am a creator. In creating a system, I have wide choice: I can build into the system whatever structures and rules I want to include. The system also includes independent agents (programs) that I create; I give them their instructions and start them going. If the agents act as I expect, operating within the rules and structures that I chose, the result will be that the system functions as I desire.

But sometimes the agents don't do what I expect (there are bugs). Acting completely in accord with their natures as I created them, they take actions I did not desire, often impeding other agents or messing up the structures. At that point, my choices are rather constrained (at least in comparison to my freedom when I was creating the system). I always have the option to destroy the entire system and create a new one, but usually there are reasons not to do that. Short of that, any major change to the structures or rules will cause other agents to be unable to function, and almost always will result in problems worse than the ones I'm trying to solve. I usually have to seek some change I can make in the structures or rules, that will be small enough not to impede other agents,

but large enough to solve the problem at hand.

You see the analogy, I'm sure. I think that God, in creating our world, could have created it any way God chose; and God chose certain rules and certain structures to incorporate into the creation. One rule that God chose is this: someone will receive good if they do good (and, implicitly, will receive bad if they do bad). This rule of reward and retribution seems to me to be foundational in God's creation; I can see it reflected everywhere, even in the very laws of physics. And God created independent agents (people) in the creation, and gave them instructions. If the agents had acted as God expected, the entire creation would have functioned as God desired.

But the agents did not act as God expected. As a result, in accord with the rule of reward and retribution that God built into the creation, the agents received bad; in fact, death. Now that the agents have shown this tendency, God's choices are limited by the creation God created. God always has the option, of course, to destroy the entire creation and create a new one. That's one choice. God also has the option, of course, to ignore the problem; to let the creation continue to go in the direction it's headed. That's a second choice. A third choice would be to change the creation to remove the rule of reward and retribution. As I said, I see this rule as fundamental to the creation; if it were removed, physics would change so much that I don't believe humans as biological creatures could continue to survive.

It seems to me that the fact that God didn't choose any of these first three choices shows love for God's created agents. Any of these choices would hurt or destroy us. In love for us, God sought another choice. I think that God found one small change that could be made, that would not change the creation so drastically as to kill all life, but would be sufficient to

allow the problem to be fixed. God changed the rule of reward and retribution in this way: the good or bad result no longer needs to happen to the person who did the good or bad action. (Even this change has affected creation significantly; without it, we would never have to ask the question “why do bad things happen to good people?”) This allowed God to shift the major consequences of everyone’s sin to one person, saving all the other people.

But even this was not loving enough for our God, it seems to me; we have been told that God will not let even one out of a hundred be harmed, but will expend great effort to rescue even the one hundredth. So God found a way to extend God’s self into the creation; to be simultaneously both the Creator, outside of creation, and one of the agents within the creation. (Fans of the movie “The Matrix” will recognize this as analogous to what the Machines did in “Agent Smith” – for a very different purpose, of course.) Using the rule change, then, God shifted the major consequences of everyone’s sin onto that one person who was God’s self acting within the creation.

Thus was Christ’s death an unavoidable consequence of (a) the way God created the world, (b) our sin, and (c) God’s incredible love for all of us, that God would enter into the world and take our death upon God’s self.

Nathan E. Schroeder

Theology of Freedom, Part 3

Colleagues,

Recapping: The starting point for Christian freedom is freedom with God: no more bondage, neither rebellion, nor servility nor despair in the God connection. God-connected in a brand new way—in freedom. What is that? Like being “born anew” in last Sunday’s Gospel (John 3). Freedom with God is not separation and “now out on my own.” That’s what the prodigal son thought. He was wrong. That was rebellion. Nor is it the dutiful grudging service of the elder brother. That was servility, maybe even despair. Freedom with God is still being bonded with God, but the bonding is not bondage. Call it faith, a Christ-connected bonding with God that opens all the doors.

Freedom’s endpoint is “cosmic” freedom, the freedom signalled to us in the few glimpses we have in the Gospels of the Easter Jesus—with all the nemeses, even space/time confinements, left behind. In this vision of freedom Paul (Rom. 8) links Christians to the rest of creation and doxologizes: “Creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.” God’s kids with God’s cosmos—all the doors open. Bonded, but not bondage. Like parents and children, St. Paul reminds us, not like masters and slaves.

In the third and final section of W.Elert’s chapter on freedom, he seeks to show what such freedom looks like when it shows up within the parameters of the old creation. [For Elert’s full text [check this url: <https://crossings.org/thursday/Thur1217.htm>](https://crossings.org/thursday/Thur1217.htm)] That is not so easy to do, since Christian freedom too participates in the “already, but not yet” of the new creation flowing from Christ’s Easter victory. It too is “sub cruce tecta,” hidden under the

crosses Christians bear, yet genuinely present and operative under what may look like the opposite. Elert sketches it under the rubrics of “believed” freedom and “lived” freedom—“geglaubte Freiheit—gelebte Freiheit.”

Believed freedom arises from trusting Christ’s promise, his very words “If the Son of God make you free, you are free all the way.” But that only works when you trust it. Trusting bonds you to the freedom. Non-trusters remain in bondage. And when you do believe it, trust it, you get the chutzpah to live it, to act as though it really is true for you.

One NT example of such believed and then lived freedom is Paul and Silas in prison in Philippi in Acts 16. Their feet are in stocks in the innermost cell, and what are they doing? Praying and singing hymns, and the prisoners are listening to them—at midnight! What could be more bizarre? But this is just the overture to this freedom tale. Now comes an earthquake that crumbles the prison walls and loosens the chains of the prisoners. Awakened by the temblor, the jailer sees his life ruined and draws his sword to end it all. Paul stops him with a shout. Relative calm returns. They stay up the rest of the night talking about the Easter Lord. The jailer and his entourage “rejoice” to get bonded to this same Lord. When daylight arrives flunkies from city hall come hat in hand: “Oops, our mistake. Please leave quietly so no one notices.” Paul gets his dander up: “No way, the top brass put us here. They’ll have to come and eat crow, or we won’t go!” Talk about chutzpah!

Who is free and who isn’t among the actors in that bizarre drama? Though in innermost solitary confinement Paul and Silas, bonded to Christ, are in bondage to no one. Everybody else in the drama is—to real chains, to career ruin, to public image pressure. Except for the jailer, whose job it is to put folks in bondage. Though he starts out un-free, he (with his household)

moves into Christ-bonded freedom. He's no longer in bondage to anyone. It's a wild story of believed freedom that leads to lived freedom—in real time, in the face of real bondage.

This believed and lived freedom is at the center of Luther's classic treatise on Christian Freedom with its opening paradox: "A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all." Believed freedom grounds the first statement. And from that grounding comes the lived freedom to be a "little Christ" to everybody, as Luther says later in the treatise, not inhibited, not in bondage to anything of my own agenda or someone else's hegemony to restrain me from such serving in freedom. In short, from giving away my life.

In Elert's words:

In keeping with God's verdict that sets us free, "believed freedom" is a present tense reality – complete and incapable of further expansion, for when God's word of acquittal sets us free, we are 100% free. As "lived freedom," on the other hand, it proceeds in case-by-case fashion wherever it confronts chains to be broken or opposition to be overcome—be it a challenge to faith, a temptation, the weakness of the flesh, or opposition arising from considerations to "be reasonable," or that coming from political power. Here is where freedom demonstrates its alluring, incendiary, unpredictable power.

As the antithesis to believed and lived freedom, Elert describes people who think they "own" freedom. My hunch is (he was writing this in 1949) that he's alluding to the American program in post-WWII Germany to "re-educate" Germans into the American understanding of freedom. He says: "By contrast, those who act as though they own freedom are satisfied and do not know what to do with it. They then seek to lecture others all about freedom

and wind up tormenting those who are not yet free. We encounter such freedom know-it-alls in the realm of politics. Freedom that claims to have all the answers is freedom with no future." Believed freedom is always held in an open hand. You can't be bonded with your fist closed. Thinking that you own freedom, that you "have" it, is closing the fist. It's losing freedom because it sacrifices bonding. It's the slide back into slavery. No bonding = bondage.

That American predilection may not have been all that obvious to many in 1949. But it is obvious to many in 2005—even if these many are not within the USA. We are lecturing the world about freedom, since we "possess" it and others as yet do not. That was the entire inaugural speech last month. And in doing so, Elert reminds us, we torment others. We are satisfied that "at home" there is no serious freedom agenda; we ARE the land of the free. So there is nothing to be "believed." Our calling is to teach it to others. But is genuine freedom ever "taught"? Did we Americans "learn" freedom? The freedom we enjoy is a "received" freedom, a gift. Believed freedom is received freedom, not self-achieved freedom. Our own un-free chutzpah about the freedom we propound was documented in the president's inaugural speech, his "Ode to freedom American style." At root it is a freedom bonded to no one, surely not to other nations. If they won't agree with us, we'll go it alone. We're big shots, we can take care of ourselves and take care of the agendas we know that others should join us in pursuing, even if they refuse to do so.

Mixed in here is the notion that freedom is a commodity—something you can transfer, therefore even exportable. Not so. Freedom is no more a commodity than married fidelity is. Both are relational realities. Their locus is in human hearts. You cannot package and sell them—or even give them—to someone else. And those who think they can, because they already own freedom, are already sliding into bondage.

Alleged freedom with no need of bonding to other people(s) is finally not bonded to God either, despite the "in God we trust" on the US dollar bill. If not "bonded to God in freedom," then there is only one other option: bondage. Even while shouting about our freedom. Other voices from other nations see our bondage—to our own national ego, to our own consumption of umpteen times our fair share of the creations' resources, our own militarism which while wreaking havoc on others will someday—perhaps just fiscally—turn and rend us too. And, linking all that together, bondage to blindness. Physician, heal thyself, others cry out to us. But we're so busy healing the world, sorting out the splinters in the eyes of others, that the log in our own eye we never see. In Iraq we are getting our come-uppance. And we don't know what — what all — the consequences will be. First reports of the self-destructing of our returning soldiers are dreadful.

Humans were created for bonding. That may well be a (or even the) fundamental element of our being created in the "image of God." Not only is it "not good that the human should be alone," it may well be impossible to be human at all "alone." Surely that applies to human communities as well. Nations that are "loners" are nations on their way to being un-human. With that we are back to the theology of empire. Empires are by definition "loner" nations who colonize others nations under their alleged "reign of peace." But none of the colonized peoples ever experience that to be true. Colonization is not bonding, it is bondage. And the divine irony is that in putting others into bondage, individuals and nations do the same to themselves.

The freedom to be a bonded-to-no-one empire is bondage. It's the very sort of bondage Luther explicates in his Bondage of the Will opus maximus. Freedom of will is to be free to do what you ought, but no human possess that freedom, he said. Does any nation? Unlikely. It is the axiom—at least no wadays—that

nations act in their own self-interest. No one seems to challenge the rightfulness of that axiom. But why should that not be challenged? If self-interest is the stuff of sin in individual humans (*incurvatus in se et seipsum*), does it escape that divine verdict when practiced on a national scale?

If self-interest in individual humans is the generative motor that leads to their eventual self-destruction, why would it be any different in a national community of such humans? So it would really be in one's self-interest NOT to be self-interested, for that would mitigate the drift towards self-destruction. The history of empires is the history of mega-nations on the way to self-destruction. On what grounds might an empire that hypes freedom, but un-bonded freedom (and thus bondage) be an exception to that axiom? Especially if it is a divine axiom: the nations strut their stuff, but the Lord holds them in derision.

Sometimes it makes me wonder about the American Civil War. What made the UNION such a godly goal that four years of fraternal suicide was called for to preserve it? The USA is content (mostly) with a neighbor nation to the north and one to the southwest. So why could it not also have had a neighbor nation to the southeast? Lincoln's unabashed acknowledgement of the need for national repentance during that war—could that not have signalled his own admission that “preserving the union” just might have been a false god?

There is little evidence of our nation's awareness of any need for repentance today. Even President Bush's charm campaign this week to re-achieve “bondedness” with Europe bears no patent signals of repentance. At best it's: “Let bygones be bygones, let's start afresh. We really are united.” Maybe even a bit of the passive voice, but with no sense of responsibility. “Mistakes were made,” yet that is a far cry from repentance. And

the words are from Jesus: Except you repent, you perish.

Suppose our born-again President had some of Paul & Silas's chutzpah to enact believed freedom in the midst of the maxi-chaos confronting us and much of which we've generated as the world's only empire left. He, and we the nation who elected him, would have the chutzpah for the following:

1. To repent publicly before the world—at least for a few of the crassest items of our national megalomania. [See Lincoln, the first ever republican president, for cues on repentance for war.]
2. To say Iraq was not only a mistake, but (following Luther) that preemptive war is murder. We are sinners for doing it.
3. So we are stopping right now. All our forces are being withdrawn. We are the losers in this war as we were in Vietnam.
4. The 80 billion asked for to continue the war—plus another couple of 80s—will be turned over to the European Union (or perhaps better, some Arab nations coalition) to see what can be done in post-America Iraq—with no American participation other than funding the reparations—or whatever the EU/Arab coalition invites us to do. 80 billion dollars repeated twice is \$1000 for every man, woman, child in Iraq.
5. We need no guarantees of anything.
6. And the US president will make a personal visit to Pyongyang to work with President Kim on detente with N. Korea. For every a-bomb they may have and now demolish, we will demolish 1000 of our own. Ditto for Teheran.
7. And US tanks will lumber out of Iraq across Jordan to take positions on the Palestinian side of the wall of bondage that Israel is erecting to strangle Palestinians. And at a not-too-distant announced date they will lumber forward

and demolish the wall—just as the Berlin wall was razed.

Of course, it's crazy. Incredibly risky, insanely dangerous. Of course. More knowledgeable folks could come up with a better list. But remember, "more reasonable" is NOT one of the rubrics for "lived" Christian freedom. But you get the point. Believed freedom is always a dare. But the dare is not that it will be successful. Instead it is a dare to believe that the One who puts received freedom into our hands will not close his fist when we turn believed freedom into lived freedom.

Believed freedom possesses liberating power only when it confronts situations of bondage. For this reason the freedom of the children of God is genuine power, not despite the "not yet" element, but precisely because of it. Its power presses forward into places where it is "not yet." It moves spasmodically—here a spurt, there a spurt—Rosa Parks, Nelson Mandela, Vaclev Havel, M.L.King, Desmond Tutu, Mother Teresa—as temporal world history unfolds. Freedom is on the increase in the world. Admittedly, that is a statement of faith. It cannot be proved statistically, simply because of freedom's hidden character. But where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And where Christ is preached, the Spirit of the Lord is promised. Consequently we cannot doubt that, as Christian proclamation presses forward into new areas of the world, freedom too is on the increase. What happened in the jail at Philippi is the paradigm—even if it never shows up on CNN.

A side item: As more and more Africans are calling Jesus Lord, freedom is on the increase there in the very face of the evidence to the contrary that the media put before us. And conversely, as God's Platzregen moves patently from the northern hemisphere to the southern one, freedom shrivels in "the West" even as less-than-Christian gospels flourish. Christian freedom always arises precisely in those places where it encounters

opposition, in the face of the attempt by enemy powers to suppress it. How freedom will react in any given instance remains for the outsider a complete enigma. Since it remains intrinsically hidden, one can expect to see it come on stage clad in the most unlikely costumes. Only believers have a clue about believed freedom—and even they are sometimes unsure if they are seeing it or not.

One more paragraph from Elert: “The appearance of freedom mystifies the normal thinking of outsiders, how in fact it tears apart the seams of normal events in the world. When analyzed under the rubrics of the law-structured world this freedom appears to lack real substance. It is, however, God’s personal presence in new human creatures. It defies any earthly attempt to get a handle on it. For this reason Christian freedom is subversive and disruptive of world history. It injects uncertainty into all the schemes of politicians and social reformers, for it reckons with the eventual collapse of the entire cosmos. In fact, as the first fruits of total freedom, it is already secretly at work dismantling the entire network of the law-structured world we live in.”

Karl Barth—who was often on the other side of the fence in debates with Elert—made only one visit to the USA in his lifetime. Some of us teaching at Valparaiso University in those days made the pilgrimage to the U. of Chicago to hear “Karl the Great.” In one of his lectures he got “preachy,” and chided us for the fact that with all the hoopla about freedom, American theology never developed a “theology of freedom.” Even after 50 years that is still largely the case in “mainline” theology. But really that is no surprise. “Those who act as though they own freedom are satisfied and do not know what to do with it.” So don’t expect it from them.

But liberation theology did come. And where did it come from?

From the folks who were un-free in the favillas of Latin America and in the racial and gender ghettos of the USA. Once more, no surprise. Christian freedom, “lived” freedom, occurs only where un-freedom rules. Once more Elert: “Those who carry this freedom in their hearts [that’s “believed freedom”] know that all ropes of bondage can be torn to shreds. With knowing smiles they see the rust on all chains of oppression. Aware that all revolutions inevitably run out of steam, they can detect the self-serving substratum in every political program.”

Is our American revolution any exception? Is American freedom shredding, rusting? Only believed freedom is rust-proof. Owned freedom, commodity freedom, freedom with no bonding, is not. It will not save the world, least of all with guns. It will not save the USA either. Believed-freedom folks see that. The log is out of their eye. That’s no achievement on their part. “Liberation from logs” is another part of Jesus’ gift-package. They act it out in the Philippi prison paradigm. In doing so they may well stay up all night talking about Jesus to folks in bondage. When it clicks, the newly-liberated folks join them in singing hymns.

Peace & joy!
Ed Schroeder

Theology of Freedom, Part 2

Colleagues,

ThTh #346, posted three weeks ago, examined the “theology of freedom” in President Bush’s 2005 inaugural address. At the end

of that posting came this: "For a look at the Gospel's radically different freedom GO to an early ThTh posting, now archived on the website <www.crossings.org>. Click on Dec. 18, 1998. I hope to work from that essay for next week's posting." But other topics intervened for two weeks. So now finally back to freedom.

And I'll begin with something I found in Mark Mattes's book, the subject of last week's ThTh posting.

"The church today is trying to do so many tasks because it has forgotten the task for which it exists: delivering the good news. The gospel is a word that frees. In this regard, the gospel is not 'whatever' frees but is tied to a specific liberator, Jesus Christ, and offers a specific liberation – from sin, death, wrath, and the devil. It allows us to be restored to creation, to be the caretakers of God's beautiful garden, and to treasure and savor the delights of this garden as well.

"What then is freedom? In the gospel, we are free FROM the wrath of God as it is exhibited in its various manifestations, including our indifference to holy things, our seeking to control our destinies, and the pervasive meaninglessness that has been widespread for the last hundred years and more, to which God has given us up. We are free FOR sheer enjoyment of God, the world, and our very lives, which, as created, are intertwined with others. Acknowledging God to be God allows us to be free from "ambitio divinitatis" [the yen to be God ourselves], allows us to accept our humanity, including those aspects of ourselves that apart from God's affirmation of us in our entirety we would find unacceptable.

"In such trust that God is for us, and from the assurance of God's present commitment to us, the future is promised as a space for the flourishing of life, not only personally but also socially and cosmically. In God's provision, there will be

enough for us. We need not be driven by the anxiety that results in greed. Furthermore, the past is not something from which we must flee in shame or guilt, but instead can become an integral part of our histories and identities. We are free from the compulsion of establishing our own worth and security, because these are in the hands of a trustworthy God.

“As free, we can be free for others—genuinely open to their needs and concerns as well as the needs of the earth. Independent of secular mythologies that legitimate human autonomy, we can see that the freedom of the gospel permits a new outlook on the social realm as an arena for securing human dignity, freedom of conscience, and the right to education, important democratic ideals, expressions of God’s providential grace in history. Luther’s rediscovery of the gospel helped permit an acknowledgment of these ideals.” (p.184)

So far Mark Mattes. I probably should stop right now, let that stand as the great statement it is, and simply sign off for this week. But Mark’s words press so many buttons. One button links to the item on the Crossings website mentioned in the opening paragraph above. That was the text of the chapter on freedom in Werner Elert’s Ethics book. Mattes is in the same ballpark.

Elert’s chapter has three parts: 1. Just what is Christian freedom (and what is it not)? 2. What all (yes “all!”) is included in Christian freedom? 3. Christian freedom is “believed” freedom. How does that work in world history?

1. Elert’s answer to “Just what is Christian freedom?” begins with a classic German quotation: “Those who are free are not those who can do whatever they want. Rather those are free who can want to do what they ought to do.” The first clause—to do whatever you want—is de facto libertinism, not freedom, even though it’s the implicit notion of

freedom widespread in the world, and especially in America these days. It's "to be your own boss," to do things "my way," for "after all, it's a free country!" It's the freedom of being a "free agent." But that means an agent of no second party (as the term agent once meant), but a person working just for myself. Such a "free" agent is Luther's definition for the "unfree" sinner: "incurvatus in se et seipsum" – turned into oneself and one's own agendas. Free agents are not confined to the sports world. Isn't that the very notion of freedom in America's national self-perception these days? We operate as a "free agent" in today's world—"incurvatus in se et seipsum." The second clause "Rather those are free who can WANT to do what they OUGHT to do" has roots that go back to Luther. Says Elert: "This is the concept of freedom that Luther advocated in his debate with Erasmus on the freedom of human will. Luther's point, however, was to show that NO human being possesses it."

Let's take a closer look at the Luther and Erasmus debate.

The two classic texts for the theology of freedom in the Lutheran tradition carry two seemingly contradictory titles. One is "Bondage of the Will" [De Servo Arbitrio, in Latin. "Arbitrium" in Latin is not literally "will." The first word for "will" is "voluntas." "Arbitrium" is human ability for choosing, deciding. So Luther's title is better rendered: "Concerning Enslaved Decision-making"]. The other one is titled: "Christian Freedom." So what is it—slavery or freedom? Answer: Yes. Both texts come from Luther's hand. He thought the first one was one of the few things he did that might still be worth reading after he died.

In "Bondage of the Will" (1525) Luther is going to the mat with the superstar of his day, Erasmus, who had just

published an essay on the freedom of human decision-making. Humans have to have free choice, free will, argued Erasmus (and the Western world after him), or else they are automata with someone else pulling the strings. And if that were so, if outside forces determined everything they did, they could not be held accountable for their decisions and actions. Moral life disappears if we do not freely choose to do what we do indeed do. We humans thus decide for or against what we “should” choose. And we are free to go either way. We are free to follow that “ought,” even when we don’t. We could have done so. For such freedom is there.

Not so, said Luther, “chopping logic” [his phrase] with Erasmus from the Scriptures. No such freedom is available to the post-Paradise human race. Sinners are stuck being sinners, and God still holds us accountable for being just that. All the choices of sinners are sinner choices. Their choosing is infected by the incurvature virus—always bending everything I do back into my self and my agendas. Even the decisions of real do-gooders, i.e., the Pharisees in the NT Gospels, still register on the “incurvatus” test. Do-gooders desire feedback, get brownie points, for their good deeds. For all their good stuff, said Jesus, Pharisees too do not “go down to their house justified.”

But that’s not fair! And God is obligated to be eminently fair. So said Erasmus. So has our Western civilization following in his train. [Bob Bertram often said: Luther won the theological debate with Erasmus, but Erasmus won the hearts and minds of the Western world, much of Western theology included. There just “has to be” free will.]

So human choosing must be free, or God is unfair. But suppose Luther’s reading of the scriptures is right. Human

choice is enslaved to incurvature, AND God still holds us accountable. Even if that is perfectly clear to us, is “unfair!” a wise response? “Careful,” Luther cautions, “It is dicey business for a cracked pot to call the potter unfair. He could just drop the hammer to settle the argument.”

There is another way to cope with the dilemma. St. Paul, one of Luther’s sources, “justifies” God in the very midst of this dilemma thus: “God has imprisoned all in disobedience [damned if you do, damned if you don’t] so that he may be merciful to all” (Rom. 11:32). It’s not: “How can a just God get away with this?” but “How does God in mercy get us out of this mess?” No surprise, the answer is Christic.

Because the answer is Christic, Christian freedom arises where worldlings least expect it: in a sinner’s relationship with God. That’s MM’s first answer above. Back again to Elert’s text. In Luther’s debate with Erasmus there were “two different concepts of freedom involved. These differences in freedom arise from different meanings ascribed to the law. For Erasmus God’s law is perceived to be a mandate addressed to our will. For Luther the law of God is seen as a divine verdict that condemns us. ... Our un-freedom here is that we are already under a guilty verdict from God, and therefore we are not free.” Our unfreedom is a God-problem. In Christ God offers sinners an opposite verdict: Guilty-sinner, yes, but now forgiven-sinner—free from guilt. Free with reference to God? Sounds too dangerous. Even so, “If the Son makes you free, you are free all the way!”

Christians are free people, says Elert, “not because they can now do what they could not do before, namely, fulfill

the law, but because they no longer even exist for the law (Gal. 2:19). It is not that we are free FOR the law as Kant maintains, but we are free FROM the law as Paul proclaims.”

2. The dimensions of Christian freedom. Fundamental is: Free from the law because of free access to God. Christian freedom is free access to God, access that was previously blocked off for us. When we now face God, we are free, since the divine judge has acquitted us. This acquittal alters the value of everything that we are. Consequently everything done by an acquitted sinner is an act of a free person. But then the question arises: how can we live day by day in the freedom given to us in this divine verdict? If freedom means being free from the law, then it also means living apart from the law. Is that then a lawless life? Instinctively, when we hear of living without the law, we think we are staring into the abyss of libertinism—doing whatever you want, instead of wanting to do what you ought to do. Paul, too, sees this abyss, but its danger in no way compels him to retract any part of his doctrine of freedom. Freedom is itself a dangerous commodity.

You do not banish the spectre of libertinism by subjecting the new self again to the law’s dominion. Instead, the real antidote for libertinism is to be led “by the Spirit.” “If you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law” (Gal. 5:13-18; Rom. 7:1-17). Our experience of the newness in our day-to-day living comes as the Holy Spirit’s power continues to renew us. That power is God’s personal presence with us. God’s Spirit, not God’s law, is the new active subject at the center of our new lives.

It is inconceivable that the Spirit of God as the formative agent for our new life could be subject to any

law. "Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom" (2 Cor. 3:17). Even the restoration of the image of God within us does not take place according to some divine command, but rather in conformity with the image of Christ. That image is the "Christ in us," not a new lawgiver, but the personified measure of all things, as he was for his first disciples.

It would seem, according to the apostolic witness, that the freedom of God's new creatures can mean a host of different things: freedom of faith, freedom of the Spirit, freedom from guilt, freedom from the law's jurisdiction, freedom from cultic regulations, freedom from sin and its dominion – a multiplicity of freedoms, it seems. But that list is not yet complete. There is one more freedom which makes the apostle Paul groan as he thinks about it. The creation's own liberation—and with it the space-time liberation of human creatures as well.

We see snippets of this—in a glass dimly—in the post-Easter Jesus of the Gospels. He appears and reappears totally free from any space-time limits. "His resurrection breaches the massive cosmic wall that encircles us, thereby opening our view into a freedom where all cosmic requirements and limits are gone." Elert calls it "total freedom, anthropological as well as cosmic, not a private affair just for the children of God, but an event arising from the collapse of the entire cosmos with all its 'rulers and authorities and powers' (1 Cor. 15:24), every one of which has oppressed, coerced, and dominated the powerless. This collapse of the cosmos is not the ultimate natural catastrophe. It is instead the conclusion of Christ's battle with his adversaries, the cosmic powers that rule in darkness along with all the other forces of the cosmos, 'whatever their names may be' (Eph. 1:21;

6:12; Col. 2:15).”

This is the Son of God who, when “he makes you free, you are free indeed” (John 8:36), and it is from him that the children of God await their total freedom, righteousness, sanctification, imperishability and immortality (1 Cor. 15:53; Eph. 6:24). All of these are freedoms from something: from guilt, from blemish, from decay, from death. They add up to be the total negation of all negations, the glorious freedom of the children of God (Rom. 8:27). We cannot yet envision the whole picture, because “it does not yet appear what we shall be” (1 John 3:2).

Enough for this week. To be continued, d.v., hopefully concluded, next time. Freedom, Part 3, will attempt to link this Christic cosmic freedom to the freedom in the inaugural address. They both are talking about “worldly” freedom, but seems to me they are worlds apart. If you want a preview, check Elert’s third section in his Freedom chapter on the Crossings website: The Hidden Power of “Believed” Freedom in World History. I intend to start there.

Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

A Book Review. “The Role of

Justification in Contemporary Theology” by Mark C. Mattes

Colleagues,

You ought to know about this book—and with this rambling review I’d like to tease many of you into (buying and) reading it. Peace & joy!

Ed Schroeder

Mark C. Mattes.

THE ROLE OF JUSTIFICATION IN CONTEMPORARY THEOLOGY.

(Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2004). 198pp. Paper. US\$25.

Mark Mattes has given us a major work, in at least three ways. 1) He puts the theology of five superstar Protestants of our time—four Germans, one American—under the microscope to determine how faithful they are to the fundamental criterion [“discrimen” is the Latin word he likes] which they all claim to acknowledge, justification by faith alone. 2) He does so with a competence that puts him at home inside the complex theologies of these five—Eberhard Juengel, Wolfhart Pannenberg, Juergen Moltmann, Robert Jenson and Oswald Bayer. Four Germans and one American (Jenson). I know a little bit about this quintet, have met four of them over the years. But MM “talks shop” with them as though they grew up on the same block. I marvel. 3) As for that “discrimen” by which he tests them,

Mattes knows what justification-by-faith (and its flipside corollary, a law-promise hermeneutic) is all about in Reformation theology. He uses it masterfully to test the superstars. The first four fail the test; Bayer does not. That "Aha!" about the justification criterion and how to use it—where did MM get that? Apparently Gerhard Forde at Luther Seminary (St. Paul, MN) mentored him in that direction during his own seminary days.

It's a masterful work, but by no means an easy read. Initially because the five theologians Mattes analyzes aren't easy to read. They manufacture jaw-breaker vocabulary as they go along. [How did Jesus get by using mostly street talk?] So when Mattes says about Eberhard Juengel, "He claims that language mediates experience and truth (which is metaphorical, not discursive, and capable of pluriform meanings and referentialities), even disclosing God's grace – God coming into experience via an 'analogy of advent,'" you may well gulp on first reading.

But that is Mattesian plainspeak, his dumbing down for us what is Juengel-speak: "to understand [truth] much more primordially as that interruption of the ontological cohesion of the (created) world (the cohesion of its actuality), through which we attain to the position of being over against our world so that something like 'adaequatio intellectus et rei' becomes possible. For this elementary interruption of the cohesion of our actuality ought to contain within itself an even more primordial correspondence and unconditioned trustworthiness. Is invocation of God this kind of elemental interruption of our life and so of the world?" (31) Imagine what that sounds like in Juengel's original German!

All five of the theologians MM presents to us are no easy reads. I still cannot understand why there are (apparently) no "nickel words" for doing serious theology in German. Reminds me

of this: Years ago I translated a small piece by Vatican II German superstar Karl Rahner for English publication. Later I told a German Roman friend that I'd done so. His comment: "We're still waiting for someone to translate Rahner into German!" Here's one wild thought: the four Germans presented here carved out their professorial careers at universities in Tuebingen and Heidelberg. The Neckar River runs through both towns. Is it something in the water?

Unlikely. For American-born Jenson, himself nurtured over the years on German theology, is scarcely less daunting with his rhetoric. Sample: "Since our Lord's self-identity is constituted in dramatic coherence, it is established not from the beginning but from the end, not at birth but at death, not in persistence but in anticipation. The biblical God is not eternally himself in that he persistently instantiates a beginning in which he is all he ever will be; he is eternally himself in that he unrestrictedly anticipates an end in which he will be all he ever could be." (123).

Mattes never complains about such matters. Apparently because he can and does also operate in the verbal world of the theologians he's wrestling with. But I digress. Enough about theologian-speak that sheds darkness rather than light. That's my tick, not Mattes'. Fifty years ago this summer Marie and I went to Hamburg University (on HER Fulbright scholarship!)-for my plunge into grad work in German theology. So I can cope-sortuv-but not always as a happy coper.

Back to Mark Mattes.

1. His basic outline: First chapter is on "Justification's Role in Theology." Here's his axiom: "Theology needs to take leave of the quest for system and affirm its role as the art of discerning how to deliver the promise." System

is not a dirty word per se. MM's own "system" has the promise at the "hub" (his favored term) and it all flows from and back to that. The "systems" that are no-no's are the mega-systems that seek to fit all reality under some one conceptual umbrella—Hegel's dialectic now in a number of modern formats, the rationality that (allegedly) dominates academe whereby universities lay claim to universality, to covering all the bases. At root they may resemble the hub-system that MM calls for, the difference being that there is a different promise at that hub-center, an "other" gospel. So they are incapable of "discerning how to deliver THE promise." If the other gospels in these mega-systems could be divested of their soteriological pretensions, they might themselves be save-able – and be rightfully affirmed by theology grounded in the promissory hub of justification.

2. Then comes a chapter each on the five theologians. They fall into two categories. Three of them—Juengel, Pannenberg and Moltmann—strive to be Justification theologians in "theological strategies of accommodation." That means they seek to make justification-theology commendable to the university-worlds of cultured intellectuals in which they work, an increasingly post-Christian world ever since the Enlightenment. That agenda recalls Schleiermacher's 200-year old "Speeches on Religion [addressed] to the Cultured Intellectuals who Despise Her." Hence the term "accommodation." They strive to make justification theology compatible, yes commendable, to the agendas that today's VIPs hold dear. There is little evidence that Schleiermacher met any success in his attempt at accommodation. In a footnote MM cites John Leith's parallel observation: "German university theology . . . fascinates many American theologians today. . . . Yet those who are fascinated

with this theology have not . . . taken seriously the ineffectiveness of this theology in Germany itself and in Europe. Why has this theology so little effect on the vitality of a declining church in Europe and so little impact on social and political life? Every seminary professor needs a reality check—is the theology of the university preachable so that it can sustain congregations over a period of time?” Such theology is, of course, preachable. It happens every Sunday. But if it is not “promise-preaching,” MM claims, it’s not God’s gospel; and if it’s not God’s gospel, there is only one other option. So where do such preachers get this unpromising stuff? From their teachers. If seminary profs don’t know how to put the promise at the hub, their students won’t learn it either. MM doesn’t get that harsh, but I’m not contradicting his message.

3. Juengel does his accommodation with “Justification in the Theology of the Speech Event.” Contemporary linguistic philosophy is the big umbrella under which he places justification . Pannenberg with “Justification in the Theology of the Metaphysical One” seeks to “map reality [that’s what metaphysics is] so as to show how God fits on this map” and do so in a way that, he thinks, will commend God to contemporary despisers of religion. Moltmann with “Justification in the Theology of Liberation” comes off sounding less arcane. Liberation—we’ve all heard about that. His focus is ethics—doing the right thing to make a better world. No dictionary needed to understand that. With his theology of hope and of the crucified God Moltmann holds before us God’s design and energy for the world’s future. His own hope is to galvanize us as ethical agents for transforming our broken world into that “future pure world of righteous social transactions.”

4. What happens to the promise, and to justification, in these three accommodationist paradigms is not good news. Mattes shows this with step by step skill and convincing argument. For the details you will have to read for yourself. The "Platzregen" (Luther's metaphor for the promise—a passing thunder-shower) moves on when the people getting rained on opt for other agendas.
5. Two of MM's quintet, Jenson and Bayer, are non-accommodationists. They see the major umbrellas of today's culture—including academic culture—as "other gospels" and thus dismiss any strategies of accommodation. Mattes calls Jenson's brand of non-accommodation as "Justification in the Theology of the Perfected Church." Early in his teaching career Jenson held justification-by-faith to be the hub, and together with his then colleague Eric Gritsch, wrote the classic textbook: "Lutheranism: The Theological Movement and Its Confessional Writings" (1976). He's now moved beyond "Lutheran sectarianism" to a bi-focal ellipse of the Trinitarian dogma together with the ecumenics of the church catholic. The church catholic, not the academy nor any other manifestation of a culture that has "lost-its-story," is the community within which language exists for "presenting the reality of [the Triune] God." The axiom is: "Trinity is the abbreviated church, and church is the extended Trinity." In the process of moving away from the Lutheran law-promise paradigm to this Trinitarian catholic ellipse, Jenson has re-appropriated from medieval scholasticism the hermeneutic of nature-grace. So it was a surprise to some of us that he was chosen as the keynoter for the recent Aarhus (Denmark) conference on the "Future of Lutheran Theology." His lecture title: "Triune Grace."

There were at least four from this Crossings listserve

who attended that conference. We ought not to have been surprised. The conference-planners had already told us in thesis #5 of the preparatory materials: "The distinction between law and gospel belongs properly to the first-order level of divine address and human response [i.e., God's promise proclaimed and faith trusting it]. The law-gospel dialectic should not be abstracted from this concrete situation and should not be used as a theological principle that necessarily structures all doctrinal expositions of Christian faith" [a.k.a. "second-order" theological discourse]. MM's book argues for the exact opposite and demonstrates what happens to the promise in second-order theologies that adopt thesis #5. It disappears and an alternate hub replaces it.

No surprise, Jenson doesn't pass the "discrimen" test.

6. Finally MM's fifth theologian, non-accommodationist Oswald Bayer. Bayer links justification to "The Theology of the Speech Act." The fundamental speech-act comes from the promising God, not only for first-level faith—God talking to us—but then also for second-level theological reflection—our own talking about God talking to us. Our cultural worlds offer no larger blueprint where such promissory speech will fit in. "It is conflict with the world, not accommodation, that is constitutive for theology." Even within God's own speech, whereby sinners are justified, there is conflict: law and promise are two very different, yes, contradicting, speeches. What these differing speeches do to sinners, mortification and vivification, do not fit under some larger systematic umbrella of generic God-talk. The one place they do come together is in Christ on the cross. The "theology of the cross" is the promissory antithesis to all other theologies, which inevitably morph into theologies of

glory. >From just this much you can see why Bayer becomes MM's ally for reclaiming justification's role in theology today.

7. In the final chapter, "Justification as the 'Discrimen' of Theology," MM puts it all together. "Discrimen" in Latin = a dividing line. A marker that designates which side of the fence you are on. Thus in transferred meaning "turning-point, critical moment." [A much less sophisticated rendering came from one of the (losing) leaders during the Wars of Missouri back in the 1970s: "Justification by faith alone is our Lutheran bullshit detector."] But back to the Latin "discrimen." The 13 pages of this concluding chapter and the 17 of the first chapter are worth the price of the book. Though I would not recommend skipping the heavy seas of the five analytic chapters, they do take work. In the first and last chapters Mattes articulates the contours of his own systematic theology using justification as the hub – for both first- and second-level theological discourse. In these thirty pages he gives us a grand view. Which, by the way, is the venue of his daily work, Grand View [Lutheran] College in Des Moines, Iowa. Like the biblical Bethlehem, it may be one of the small colleges of the ELCA, but in Lutheran theology it is hardly the least.

I cannot conclude better than does Dennis Bielfeldt on the book's back cover: "Mark Mattes . . . argues that justification should be the hub of a confessionally based theology decentering academic construction in favor of the discernment of faith. In his analysis of Juengel, Pannenberg, Moltmann, and Jenson, Mattes adroitly describes the general trajectories of what goes wrong in Lutheran theology when justification is taken to ground first-order proclamation [=Sunday sermons] but not second-order theological reflection [the Monday-to-Friday seminary classroom]. He makes clear throughout that a properly

robust view of justification conflicts with much ecumenical ecclesiology currently popular within North American Lutheran circles. This important book deserves to be read by all those interested in the future of Lutheran theology in North America."

To which I say: Agreed. And not only in North America, but throughout the ecumenical ecclesia.

Peace & joy!

Ed Schroeder

A Lenten Devotional Booklet for 2005 on the Crossings Website

Colleagues,

For Lent 2005—A Series of Devotions on the Crossings website. Crossings office manager Cathy Lessmann and Crossings website guru Tom Law hope it will be up and ready before Ash Wednesday. What is it? Actually a re-run of a print-medium piece from a few years ago published by Creative Communications for the Parish, the St. Louis-based source of marvelous materials for congregational life, the brain-child of Dr. Larry Neeb. Larry asked me to write the series and now we have his permission to put it on our website. When Tom gets it done, GO to the Crossings homepage <www.crossings.org> and Click on "Works by EHS" under the "Library" listing at the left side of that page. Today's ThTh

posting gives you the outline and the first the first few meditations. They are correlated week-by-week with a masterpiece artwork "Christ's Seven Last Words and His Resurrection" by the late Siegfried Reinhardt. In our last exchange Tom Law said it might be dicey to correlate soft-copy and this artwork on the website, but he's going to try.

[In last week's ThTh 346 posting I'd said I wanted to continue the "freedom" theme this week. But this Lenten project pre-empted. If possible, back to freedom next week.]

Peace & joy!

Ed Schroeder

A Forty-Day Journey through Lent – but Never Alone.

Lent's 40 days through the Prism of Siegfried Reinhardt's Art.

Our own Thorny Circle of Suffering and Christ's Breakthrough.

by Edward H. Schroeder

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[the thorn: our need for forgiveness]

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Out by Easter, Out for Easter – Encountering Our Last Enemy
Easter Sunday

An Easter meditation on the Risen Christ in Reinhardt's picture. Text: I

Cor. 15, "last enemy."

Christ's breaking the circle of thorns wide open, almost jumping right out of the picture (= our "old" creation), and not merely out of the grave, that "last enemy," that last thorn in the circle of suffering to be conquered—all he does for us.

Our Lenten 40-day circle is complete, the circle of death is broken wide open.

The First Word from the Cross “Father, forgive.”

Ash Wednesday: Our Thorns and Christ’s Breakthrough

Reading: Mark 15:16-20

“After twisting some thorns into a crown, they put it on him. . . Then they led him out to crucify him.” (Mark 15:17,20)

Artist Siegfried Reinhardt is our guide for our 40-day journey through Lent. He bids us use our eyes for reading images, not just words for the journey. Let your eyes play with his masterpiece. One long thorn bramble links all seven of Jesus’ last words. At Easter he explodes from the tomb. The thorn barrier is broken. It’s all for us. Lent is about our thorns and Christ’s breakthrough.

Lent is finally “Good News” and nothing morbid at all. It is the story of a cosmic change of subjects. See how Siegfried predicates our thorns of suffering to Jesus. His seven words of pain are the thorns of our daily lives. He is the subject undergoing them all.

The other side of the drama is that Christ’s Easter life gets predicated to us. Jesus vaulting from the tomb is heading straight toward us who are viewing the picture. When Lent is over our thorn-encircled lives have open spaces for new futures.

Our Lenten journey is not really us accompanying Jesus on his way of sorrows. It’s the other way around: He walks the brambled path of our way of sorrows—so that we might get to

Easter. We accompany him in faith these 40 days so that it can happen to us—again.

Prayer: Energize us, LORD, for our 40 days—and 40 nights—through Lent. Since we know how the story ends, encourage us from Easter to face up to the thorns in our own lives and those we inflict on others. Amen

Thursday After Ash Wednesday: Forgiveness Is What It's All About.

Reading: Luke 23:32-38

“Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.” Luke 23:34.

Forgiveness is what it's all about. It's what Jesus is all about. It finally is what life—real life—is all about. But we'd never know that if we took our signals from the messages of daily life that surround us.

The recurring theme in daily life is something else. It's just the opposite: recompense. “There is no free lunch.” “You get what you've got coming to you.” Granted, that doesn't always work either. Some get cheated out of their fair shake. Some seem never to get a fair shake at all. Some get much more than their share—and even do so legally!

Nevertheless—recompense, fairness, debit-credit equity, is the melody of life's daily transactions. Suppose that recompense were God's only melody. What would happen? “The soul that sinneth it shall die.” “The wages of sin is death.” There would be no life that lasts.

But recompense is not God's last word. Jesus' first word from

the cross is God's last word for sinners: forgiveness. Reinhardt's masterpiece shows us God working out the logistics of forgiveness. It doesn't come cheap. Yet when Christ reappears at Easter, forgiveness is a fact. We can count on it, live on it—in our transactions with God, and with one another.

Prayer: Forgive us our sins, Lord, as we forgive those who sin against us. In our life too, we often know not what we do. Sing into our ears the melody of your mercy. Tune our voices to sing the same song to those we know who seldom ever hear it. Amen.

Friday After Ash Wednesday: The Thorn of Our Own Enemies

Reading: Matthew 5:43-48

"But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." Matthew 5:44

That's what Jesus says. Our knee-jerk reaction is: "Jesus, you've got to be kidding. Look at those enemies in Siegfried's first vignette. Look at their faces, especially their eyes, and those hands. How on earth can anyone, even you, love those guys?"

Don't we have enemies just like that? Take the soldier in armor, the guy with the sword. He's just doing his job, but he is out to kill me. Or the next guy, face half-covered yet full of hate, with hand reaching down to do me in.

Or the one next to him – he must be a professional burglar, eyes on the lookout, hammer ready for the next break-in, sack full of loot from his last job. Or the fourth one, yelling some obscenity at us. The finger, the face, the teeth, those eyes. Our enemies are just like that; how can we love them?

Love has become an emotion in our culture, warm fuzzies in the heart. Not so in the language of Jesus. When he says “love,” it is a concrete act of help for someone who needs it, regardless of our emotions. Thus “love your enemies” is not impossible. “Help ‘em,” says Jesus, “even when you don’t, when you can’t, like ‘em.”

Do these guys—our enemies too—need help? Absolutely. And especially at the deepest level, their relation to God. That’s the concrete help Jesus invokes for them—for us too. Not because they and we are so lovable, but because we need it. So Jesus’ word for enemies is: “Help ‘em. I gave you concrete help (and how!) here on the cross. Trust me for that and then go and do likewise.”

Prayer: Forgive us, Lord, when our hands do harm instead of help, when fear chokes out our faith and trust in you. Lord, increase our faith in the crucified and risen Jesus, and unclench our hands to give concrete help—even to our enemies. Amen.

Theology of Freedom in President Bush’s Inaugural Address 2005

Colleagues,

Freedom was the mantra of President Bush’s Inaugural Address last week. Twenty times (20x) he used the word. Fifteen times

(15x) he spoke of “liberty.” That’s what America is all about. Freedom “is the mission that created our nation.” “Now it is the . . . calling of our time . . . with the ultimate goal of ending tyranny in our world.” The resources for America’s achieving that goal are twofold: first “the power of our ideals” and second “our influence” [euphemism for military power?] “though not unlimited, but . . . considerable, and we will use it confidently in freedom’s cause.”

The turf where unfreedom still reigns is outside the USA. There was no reference to “unfreedom” in the USA. In America freedom is intact. No “fallen world” here. The “fallen world” of unfreedom is them, not us. In this speech Bush applied his Manichaeian theology to freedom. Us good guys, them not yet so good. But in this speech (except for the villains) it was mercy for the not-yet-so-good victims of unfreedom. America is in good health when it comes to freedom, but many of you are ill. Since we are so selflessly generous, we will help you get healed. And we have “considerable influence” to bring that about.

The Biblical proverb comes to mind: Physician, heal thyself. But our leaders are blind to our nation’s illness, and they speak for the nation as a whole—the blind leading the blind. So our national physicians cannot be our healers. Not only in leading, but in healing, the blind cannot heal the blind.

As Jesus told his critics in John 9, unless there is someone “sighted” on the scene, you can’t even see who is blind. And the pericope ends with this riddle: Some of the Pharisees near him heard this and said to him, “Surely we are not blind, are we?” Jesus said to them, “If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say ‘We see,’ your sin remains.”

When the blind claim to be sighted, their malady metastasizes. I’ve not seen such stern Biblical metaphors in the public media.

Some that I've seen have, however, called for a "reality check" on what Bush said. Here in St. Louis an editorial said: "We don't share his illusion that America's power and goodness can triumph everywhere. The wreckage of the idealistic crusades of Woodrow Wilson, John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson are harsh reminders of what can happen when heady idealism comes into contact with the realities of the world."

Two words in that last phrase, "idealism" and "realities," deserve a closer look.

IDEALISM

Idealism, classic philosophical idealism beginning with Immanuel Kant, is where the American notion of freedom comes from. It was transmitted to us by the English deists, whom we call "founding fathers," who wrote it into our founding charters—and into the American psyche. But that freedom is not what Luther wrote about in his classic essay on Christian Freedom, nor what Jesus in John's gospel (and Paul after him) are proclaiming when they say: "If God's Son makes you free, that's real freedom."

Bush did make a pitch toward Biblical rootage as he sought to ground "America's ideal [sic!] of freedom" in "the truths of Sinai, the Sermon on the Mount." But then, of course in pluralistic America, he HAD TO add "the words of the Koran, and the varied faiths of our people." The common thread in all of that is idealism's freedom, not Christian freedom.

REALISM

Which brings up the "realities" word. The "reality" of God envisioned in those "truths" just mentioned is God the legislator, God the rulegiver for how we are to live our lives. And God, yes, the least common denominator God of all these "varied faiths," is "for" freedom, and against unfreedom. But does that God ever leave the legislative bench and move on down

the line in the process to being judge, and after verdict-rendering, to be the one who executes those verdicts—even as executioner? Not really. And surely not for America. But the God speaking in the Bible surely does. And American religion presses the mute button on that one. Because if God ever were to be so operative INSIDE world history—which we Americans find hard to imagine—then he surely would NOT do something so drastic to us. Maybe to the evil empires—and that carried out by us good guys as God's agents. But surely not to the nation that sings God Bless America, and puts "In God we trust" right on our money.

Needed is a reality check. And the convictions diverge about what's really real and what isn't. So what else is new? In Jesus' day the ones he called "blind leaders" said they had a clear view of what reality was. In the days of the OT prophets it was the same. The God-called prophets said: "Folks, the Day of Yahweh is rolling toward us, soon to roll over us." The Shalom-prophets said: "Don't believe them. Our kings and priests (state and church) have everything in hand and God is for us, not against us. God bless our native land." The deeper anti-nomianism of American religion is not disobeying God's legislation (though there is enough of that!), but dismissing him as judicial critic and sentence-executioner.

President Bush's closing words were: "May God bless you, and may he watch over the United States of America." Despite his Evangelical faith, Bush seems not to remember that invoking God to "watch over" us is dangerous. Granted, its intended meaning is protection. But saying "God, keep your eye on me"—unless you have real righteousness—is the prayer of a fool. And if that righteousness is self-grounded (as is the righteousness of the USA), then "illusion," though technically accurate, is too soft a word. It is sheer madness. Better to say, God, look the other way. Willy-nilly Bush is asking God to check us out, to examine, to scrutinize, to measure us by divine criteria. In all the

recorded national histories in the Bible—not just Israel and Judah, but also the superpowers of Babylon, Assyria, and finally Rome—they all failed the test. “You have been weighed and found wanting.” And the ax was laid to the roots. Better the rest of us should pray: God, please ignore President Bush’s final petition—unless your chastening brings us to repentance.

Which brings up this sentence from the president: “We have seen our vulnerability [he’d just referred to the “day of fire” on 9/11/01]—and we have seen its deepest source.” I held my breath. Is he going to talk about God, the real depth dimension to 9/11? But not so. The next sentence led us astray about that Deepest Source of our vulnerability. It was not God at all. “For as long as whole regions of the world simmer in resentment and tyranny, prone to ideologies that feed hatred and excuse murder, violence will gather, and multiply in destructive power, and cross the most defended borders, and raise a mortal threat.”

Human enemies and their hate-filled ideologies. That’s the “deepest” diagnosis. Here’s the cure. “There is only one force of history that can break the reign of hatred and resentment . . . and that is the force of human freedom.” And where is that force incarnated today? There is only one possible answer.

This is America’s gospel of salvation. Compared to the genuine Gospel, it under-diagnoses the malady—call it illusion—and consequently offers healing that is also illusion. If God is ignored as the problem, it’s no surprise that God won’t figure in on the solution either. The SOURCE for America’s “day of fire”—so Jesus, and all the authentic prophets before him—is the very God America invokes for blessing. Blessing and its opposite, cursing, are divine prerogatives. God’s ambidextrous. And the curse of a “day of fire,” the prophets’ “Day of the Lord,” comes from the Creator.

At one point Bush came close to seeing God's hand in executing justice in the world (though not fiery justice for the USA), but then he backed away: "History has an ebb and flow of justice, but history also has a visible direction, set by liberty and the Author of Liberty." God did get into the sentence, but not as Author on the justice agenda, only on the freedom one. The "but" in the sentence signals something possibly adversative between justice and freedom in Bush's thought . But suppose God is the Author of both—fiery justice and fiery freedom. That's the uniform Biblical witness.

The World Trade Center crumbling on that day of fire, viewed Biblically, can only be seen as "ebb and flow of God's justice." Biblical monotheism allows for no other conclusion. "I kill and I make alive. No other deity but me," says God in Deut. 32:39. The good-guys vs. bad-guys of Manichaeism has a good god and a bad one in the mix. Thus it has a blueprint to keep Good God out of any day of fire. The source of all devastation is the cosmic Evil Empire and its earthly minions. Not so the monotheistic commitment of the Christian faith. "I kill and I make alive. No other deity but me."

Christian theology predicates both terms to God. World history, our history, also right now, also for and in the USA, is God's justice in action down on the ground. Granted, justice and freedom are different, but better to look for the link that connects them rather than the "but" that separates them. And the place where God's role in retributive justice and God's role in human freedom intersect is at the Good Friday crossing. And the upshot of that crossing, according to Christian proclamation, is Good News.

Faith in Freedom.

Freedom is a big word in the vocabulary of the Gospel. But that freedom was NOT what President Bush was talking about, though

it's likely that many American Christians thought he was. Even though Bush didn't use the dicey word "crusade," it was a "crusade for freedom" speech with America as God's agent to extend that freedom world-wide.

Even more, it was a faith-in-freedom speech. From the bully pulpit we heard a powerful sermon for the gospel of American freedom. That freedom – not Gospel freedom – is the faith-object that Americans hang their hearts on. It is the Gospel of FROGBA, the folk religion of God bless America. Is that an "other" Gospel? I think so.

He said: "We go forward with complete confidence [note "fide," the "faith" at the center of con-fide-nce] in the eventual triumph of freedom." Even though he did once say, "Not because we consider ourselves a chosen nation," paragraph after paragraph proclaimed the opposite. The world, so said Bush, should trust the USA as the source for their freedom. He may not have said it in so many words, but the message was clear. Despite Guantanamo, despite Abu Ghraib, "Trust us. Trust us for your freedom. We have faith in ourselves; you should too." That may not quite be proclaiming the USA as the God of history, but it's demonically close.

America's illusion about freedom, our exported freedom, came home this week in an NPR piece featuring American soldiers in Iraq reading their own poetry crafted on location. From one voice came this refrain to every stanza he wrote:

"Why do you want to kill me?
I came to set you free."

One plausible Iraqi answer to this American might be: The freedom you came with, accompanied by your "considerable influence," has already killed 100K of us. And you still ask why we want to kill you? Isn't this justice? Eye for an eye, tooth

for a tooth—corpse for a corpse. And the equity ratio is still way out of balance. Your refrain is not just illusion; it's delusion.

Marie is listening to the PBS program on Auschwitz as I write this on Wednesday evening. I'm trying not to listen. But the refrain keeps coming: "How could they possibly have been so hoodwinked? And so many of them Christian?"

In the era of the early church the Christians who spoke Latin said, "Aut Caesar, aut Christus." Either Caesar or Christ. Either Caesar is God or Christ is God. And it is an either-or. You can't hang your heart on both at the same time. Nor can it be for American Christians. It's Joshua at Shechem: "Choose this day whom you will serve." For Christians in the USA it is a time for confessing. It's "aut – aut."

The homosexual hassle that is wasting the substance of American denominations across the board amounts to fiddling while Christian faith burns out and the FROGBA Gospel takes over. Where is any church commission working on this primal agenda? Luther's word as the Christian Gospel faded away in Europe already in his day, even in Reformation territory, was "Platzregen." The Gospel is a passing thunder shower. God sends it to parched fields that need it, but if the field says, "Thanks, but no thanks, we have other sources," God moves the shower elsewhere—and "a famine of hearing the word of God" (Amos 8:11) sets in. That's the deepest source of our national vulnerability.

For a look at the Gospel's radically different freedom GO to an early ThTh posting, now archived on the website <www.crossings.org>. Click on Dec. 18, 1998. I hope to work from that essay for next week's posting.

Peace & Joy!

The ELCA Task Force report on Sexuality: Conscience-bound or Conscience-freed?

Colleagues,

Last week the ELCA released its Report and Recommendations on the homosexuality issue. It is to be acted upon at this coming summer's "churchwide" assembly. It addresses the ELCA's "canon law," the denomination's rules and regulations, its operating procedures. It recommends that the ELCA stick with the canon law now in place (no blessing of same-sex commitments, no pastoral certification for non-celibate homosexuals), but recommends softening the edges of the law to admit possible exceptions. These may proceed under the rubrics of local pastoral wisdom for the blessings business, and local congregational wisdom for calling homosexual pastors. But there are two minority reports from the TF. One pushes the fence all the way down. The other calls for stiffening the fence and disciplining those who climb over it. The years of work put in by task force members must have been agonizing. >From the grapevine I heard that one member said at the end, "X-years of my life wasted." Not surprising, it is always agony to formulate canon law and keep it aligned with Christ the cornerstone. Perhaps it can't be done. Such non-alignment prompted Luther to toss the canon law of his day into the bonfire. Wasn't Jesus talking about the same dilemma when he spoke his "Woe!" to the theologians for their laws about "tithing mint and dill and cummin" (i.e., trivia)

while “neglecting the weightier matters of justice, mercy and faith”? Was he saying it can’t be done?

Timothy Hoyer, pastor of Gloria Dei Lutheran Church in Jamestown NY, offers a theological analysis of the ELCA Report. This venture didn’t succeed either, he says, in building on that primal cornerstone. Here is the case he makes.

Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

THE BOUND CONSCIENCE

What assures the consciences of Christians that they are doing God’s will? Christians, out of love for God because of Christ, want to do God’s will. However, Christians relate to God as the Father of Jesus. They do not relate to God merely as God. Thus, asking about doing God’s will with no reference to Christ amounts to omitting Christ. And that disregards what Christ has done to make his Father the Christians’ Father. Christians are actually free from worrying about how to do God’s will and are free to live following Christ as the incarnation of God’s will.

In the issues of blessing the marriages of gay couples and the calling of people in such relationships, the assuring of consciences is a concern of the Task Force on Sexuality Studies. Let us take a look at how the Task Force comforts consciences. Does the Task Force bind consciences or set them free in Christ?

>From the Report of the Sexuality Task Force: “Such calling of a person should be done with respect for those whose CONSCIENCES are BOUND [emph. added] to an interpretation of Scripture that

accords with the present policy of this church" (p. 8). "Participants in this debate are disagreeing...because their CONSCIENCES are BOUND to particular interpretations of Scripture and tradition" (p. 11). "Indeed, in his [Luther's] own defense at the Diet of Worms, he declared himself BOUND in CONSCIENCE by the Word of God" (p.11). "In the responses of our sisters and brothers in this church we heard articulate, good-faith statements of CONSCIENCES BOUND to the Word of God" (p. 11).

Consciences are either bound by God's law (or whatever words one uses as synonyms for law, such as tradition, an interpretation of Scripture, the word of God) or free in Christ. Consciences are free in Christ or bound by God's law because there is Christ's forgiveness and there is everything else. Everything else is what the law encompasses.

The Report and Recommendations have bound consciences by the law. The Report assures the consciences of Christians that they are doing God's will when they act "in the spirit of this law" (Report p. 13). When Christians ask how they can know for sure that they are doing God's will, they ask because they have doubts. They don't know if turning left is to do God's will or if turning right is doing God's will. They feel they need something to guide them, to tell them they are right, otherwise they worry that they might do something wrong. The Task Force wants to calm the worries of Christian consciences by using the law. However, godly minds cannot "be fortified against despair unless they think that through mercy on account of Christ and not on account of the law they with certainty have both righteousness and eternal life. This conviction consoles, uplifts, and saves godly minds" (Book of Concord, Kolb-Wengert edition, 166-167).

The problem with being bound to the law is that the ministry of the law is sin and death (St. Paul), and that "good works do not

bring peace to the conscience" (BoC 170.358). Even worse, to trust the law as the assurance for doing God's will is to deny knowing and trusting Christ as one's assurance. To trust the law for comfort is to reject Christ's promise of forgiveness as the way to give peace to the conscience before God. Christ, then, has died for nothing.

"For whatever is born of God overcomes the world; and this is the victory that overcomes the world, our faith. Who is it that overcomes the world but whoever believes that Jesus is the Son of God?" (1 Jn 5.4-5) The "world" includes Christians' consciences that nag them, bother them, condemn them, or falsely comfort them with the assurance that their allegiance to the law gives them good standing before God. For those who are nagged, bothered, and condemned, the good news that overcomes those things is faith, believing that Jesus is the Son of God.

"Do you not know that if you yield yourselves to any one as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin [under the law (Rom 6.14)] which leads to death, or of obedience [faith], which leads to righteousness? But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin [under the law] have become obedient from the heart [faith] to the standard of teaching to which you were committed, and, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness. I am speaking in human terms, because of your natural limitations" (Rom 6.16-19). To bind one's conscience to "an interpretation of Scripture" is to yield oneself as an obedient slave of sin, which leads to death. For when one is not bound to Christ's promise of forgiveness, the only other outcome is death.

Being bound to "an interpretation of Scripture" leads to certain behaviors, such as demanding others think the same way, demanding that others be condemned for not being bound to the same interpretation of Scripture, threatening not to share

Christ's peace with those who are not slaves of the same master named sin. A conscience bound to "an interpretation of Scripture" is "that worship which offers God our own merits" (BoC 128.49), such as, "I am a good Christian because I am orthodox," "I am a good Christian because I follow the church's teaching that's been around for two thousand years," or "I am a good Christian because I say the Bible is the true word of God." As it says in the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, "It is not enough to believe that Christ was born, suffered, and was raised again" (BoC 128.52), it is not enough to be orthodox, or believe that the Bible is the true word of God, "unless we also add this article, which is the real purpose of the narrative: 'the forgiveness of sins'" (BoC 128.51). Forgiveness of sins is what sets a conscience free from worry and also comforts the conscience that wants to know it is doing God's will.

To give people forgiveness, and to free people from death, from sin, from God's judgment and condemnation, Christ died on a cross and rose from the dead, thereby promising all people that he does forgive them, he is their peace with God, and he assures them that believing him and following him is to do God's will. Christians are now slaves to righteousness, that is, to Christ. Being bound to Christ, the conscience now loves God, truly fears God, truly asserts that God hears prayer, obeys God in all afflictions (BoC, Kolb/Wengert, 127.45).

Paul uses the expression, "slaves of righteousness," because of his hearers' "natural limitations." In his letter to the Galatians, Paul uses Christ's language of freedom. Being bound to Christ is to be free in Christ. "For freedom Christ has set us free." "For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters." Paul got this freedom language from Christ, who in John 8 said, "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free" (Jn 8.31-32). Jesus continues by saying that everyone

who commits a sin is a slave to sin and a slave does not have a permanent place in the household. The slave dies. But, the son does have a permanent place in the household. "So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed" (Jn 8.36). The Son is the one who overcame death by his resurrection.

So, instead of being bound to worrying about what is right and what is wrong, worrying about pleasing God, worrying about being judged and not getting to heaven, a Christian is free. To be free in Christ is to have faith, which "arises and consoles in the midst of fears, receives the forgiveness of sins, justifies us, and makes alive" (BoC 130.62). "Faith makes alive, because it produces peace, joy, and eternal life in the heart" (BoC 137.100).

Being free in Christ also leads to certain behaviors, such as being forgiving to others, loving others with Christ's love, being patient, kind, never insisting on one's own way, understanding, bearing one another's burdens, sharing Christ's peace, returning good for evil, loving one's enemies, doing good to those who hurt one, tending the sick, feeding the hungry. "We also begin to love our neighbor because our hearts have spiritual and holy impulses" (BoC 140.125). All that because of faith in Christ.

The promise of forgiveness is why Luther bound his conscience to Scripture and the Word of God, for to him, Scripture and the Word of God specifically meant the Gospel, the promise of Christ's forgiveness.

When binding the conscience to the law there will never be any peace with God or with one another, as the Report so clearly illustrates by showing us the diversity of views of those on both sides of the issue whose conscience is bound to an interpretation of Scripture.

Only Christ's forgiveness gives the conscience peace with God and assures Christians that they are doing God's will by their trusting Christ. Only when the conscience is free in Christ is the Christian genuinely free—free from the law's constant accusations that trouble the conscience or falsely assuage it, free from death, and confident of the promised eternal life.

That the Report of the Sexuality Task Force does not offer Christ's forgiveness as the way to free consciences with peace with God is troubling and depressing. Christ died and rose to bind people to him so that they could die with him and rise with him. Being bound to "an interpretation of Scripture" guarantees only death. Being free in Christ promises forgiveness, peace, and eternal life. For Christ is risen.

PART 2

The Task Force's binding consciences to the law is a result of the eyes of the Task Force being clouded by cataracts. Or, to use Paul's image, their eyes are veiled to the fullness of what the law does. I would explain it this way.

People in this country, the United States, are raised by sayings such things as, "If you live under my roof then you will obey the rules of this house." "No one is above the law." "We are a country ruled by law, not by any one person's whim." Everyone is supposed to be a law-abiding citizen. People hear about Christian values equated with the Ten Commandments. Perhaps it is this atmosphere of respect for the law that explains why the Report and Recommendations from the Task Force for the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America Studies in Sexuality (Report), even when it mentions law and gospel, is bound to the law, and so, like a slave, has to follow the law and completely ignores the gospel freedom of Christ forgiving all people by his death on a cross.

Perhaps the drama of Moses and the Ten Commandments, the “thunders and lightnings, and a thick cloud upon the mountain, and a very loud trumpet blast, so that all the people who were in the camp trembled” (Exodus 19.16), is what literally enthralls the Report. Listen to its language:

“Key to our understanding of the Bible is that it is centered in Jesus Christ and that it speaks to us in law and gospel. (Constitution, Bylaws, and Continuing Resolutions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 2.02) The law not only accuses us of sin; it also points to God’s will for humankind. As Lutherans, we understand that God’s gracious concern is also present in the law, which expresses God’s concern for life, health, good order, and community. (Deuteronomy 5:33) The sexual laws of Leviticus 18 have the same rationale. (Leviticus 18:5)” (Report, pp. 12-13)

“We began this section with the biblical teaching that God’s law is given for our good, that we might flourish. It is in the spirit of that law, and in the spirit of our gospel mission, to draw people in rather than to isolate them.” (Report, p. 13)

The Report mentions “law and gospel,” but then goes on in its teaching using only the law, as if there was nothing better than the law, as if the law is the greatest thing God has ever given humanity.

The Lutheran Confessions also have their explanation for why the law is held in such honor. They say that human nature thinks that righteousness is only through the law. “For human reason only focuses on the law and does not understand any other righteousness except obedience to the law” (BoC, 154.229). Which explains why the writers of many psalms praise God’s law, as in, “I will never forget your precepts; for by them you have given me life” (Psalm 119.93).

The death and resurrection of Christ changed how Christians see God's law. God's law was a guide for people until Christ came (Gal 3.23-26). Through Christ the veil of Moses is taken off the law (2 Cor 3.12). "Deceived by human wisdom, they did not see the true face of Moses but only his veiled face" (BoC, Tappert, 139.229). By faith in Christ, God's law is seen for what it fully is. "The law always accuses and terrifies consciences" (BoC, 126.38). Paul calls God's law "a ministry of sin and death." Paul says that the law "brings God's wrath." The law is the power of sin, and the law came in to increase sin (Rom 5.20). Even more, Paul says, "I was once alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came sin revived and I died; the very commandment which promised life proved to be death to me. For sin, finding opportunity in the commandment, deceived me and by it killed me. So the law is holy and just and good" (Rom 7.9-12). The law is holy and good because it kills those who sin.

The Report in contrast says that God's gracious will for humans is in the law, that the law makes life flourish, and that the law was given for our good. That "peachy" view of the law is looking at the law without Christ, as Paul and the Confessions clearly witness. When someone uses the perspective of faith in Christ, the law is always God's deadly wrath against all people. Consciences are bound to this law until faith in Christ frees them by his forgiveness.

But the Confessions then speak good news against those who think the law makes life flourish. "We for our part preach the foolishness of the Gospel, which reveals another righteousness, namely, that because of Christ, the propitiator, we are accounted righteous when we believe that for Christ's sake God is gracious to us. We know how repulsive this teaching is to the judgment of reason and law and that the teaching of the law about love is more plausible; for this is human wisdom. But we

are not ashamed of the foolishness of the Gospel. Because of Christ's glory we defend it and we ask Christ for the help of his Holy Spirit to make it clear and distinct" (BoC, Tappert, 139.230).

When consciences are bound by the law, only faith in Christ, not human wisdom or the work of a task force, can remove the covering from the law, the covering that makes the law look like God's gracious will. The death of Christ, "under the law," as Paul reminds us, obliterates any idea that the law is God's graciousness.

So, what if, instead of "in the spirit of that law" the Task Force were free to use the promise of Christ's forgiveness "to draw people in"? What if the Task Force, and the whole ELCA, were to use the promise of Christ's forgiveness as God's gracious will for humankind? What if they were to use the promise of Christ's forgiveness as the guide for how to love and care for the people of the church, which includes people who are gay? Those questions are asked because Christ's promise of forgiveness has not been used. Christ's promise was left out of the Report completely.

The law and its way of interpreting the Scripture were used by the Task Force to reach its understanding and recommendations. If the people of faith simply follow the Report, then Christ's promise will continue to be left out of the next eight months of conversation and left out of the vote at the churchwide assembly. That is no way to honor Christ. That is to deny knowing him.

There are eight months left for conversation. For the sake of Christ's glory let the church see the law as it truly is: the ministry of sin and death. And then, for the sake of Christ's glory, for after all, he is the one who died and rose for us,

let the church base its recommendations on the promise of Christ's forgiveness working through love. For "freedom itself is the goal for which Christ has set us free" (Gal. 5:1). Let that freedom be the Task Force's goal as well, and the goal of the ELCA.

Timothy Hoyer

Are Lutherans really "Strong on Justification," but "Weak on Sanctification?"

Colleagues, One of you recently asked my opinion on the generally accepted wisdom that Lutherans are "Strong on Justification," but "Weak on Sanctification." You gave me a quotation attributed to a prominent voice for renewal in today's LCMS: "A major weakness of traditional Lutheran theology has been providing people with guidelines and inspiration for spiritual growth. We are strong on justification but weak on sanctification. Many Lutheran congregation members are eager for 'solid food,' but often they only get the 'elementary truths' and the 'milk' of the Gospel in our congregations (cf. Heb. 5:12-6:1). They want to get beyond the assurance of salvation by grace and get to real growth in commitment and service."

I have no data about what "many Lutheran congregation members are eager for,"

but I do have some thoughts about "We are strong on justification but weak on sanctification." And the "we" I take

to designate Lutherans in both the LCMS and the ELCA in the USA.

Are we really “Strong on justification?” I doubt it. What evidence would prove or disprove that “we are strong on justification”? Can “weak on sanctification” be part of any package that is “strong on justification?” I don’t think so. The absence of fruits of faith doesn’t simply say: the fruits are absent. Absent fruits signal the absence of faith. Since faith is what justifies, what is there about us Lutherans that is “strong on justification?”

The colleague who posed the question, and disagreed with the quotation above, put it this way: “While we Lutherans have been very good about proclaiming justification by grace through faith [hereafter JBGTF] we (collectively speaking) have not fully understood it, entrusted ourselves to it, or practiced it...” Ay, there’s the rub. Just what are we talking about when we say JBGTF? My take is that throughout American Lutheranism no one denies JBGTF. It’s a shibboleth. JBGTF? That’s what the word Lutheran means. But here the arch-Lutheran question arises: What does this mean?

Seems to me that even the notion of “proclaiming justification by grace through faith” is a a no-no.. Proclaiming those words JBGTF—which is what many USA Lutherans may indeed do— is precisely NOT proclaiming the Gospel of Justification. Hustling folks to get them to say: “I believe in JBGTF” is not proclaiming the Gospel. It’s getting them to believe a doctrine. Do hearts start trusting Christ’s promise when they “believe” JBGTF? Well, maybe. But then again, maybe not. And if not, then such belief does not justify anybody. Believing doctrines is allegedly the Missouri Synod’s hangup. But it’s also the hangup of the ELCA. The major difference is that in the ELCA there are other doctrines that we’re “strong” on, largely ethical doctrines, whilst the LCMS is “strong” on faith-doctrines.

But that's a mis-focus for faith. Therefore it leaves us "weak," not "strong" at all, on justification too.

The object of Christian faith, the reality that faith trusts, what Christian faith is "in"—is never a doctrine. Not even a "true" doctrine. Faith's object is the promised forgiveness offered us in the crucified and risen Messiah. And that object, the promise, is what's to be proclaimed. Not JBGTF. When folks do indeed trust that promise, the CONSEQUENCE is "JBGTF."

It's probably wise to avoid ever using the words JBGTF from the pulpit, lest folks trust the shibboleth and not Christ. Possibly even worse, trusting that by trusting the shibboleth God says they're OK. Where in the NT anywhere is JBGTF what gets "proclaimed"? Paul may argue with his critics about JBGTF theology, but when he gets to proclaiming, he claims that there was only and always one thing he ever proclaimed: Christ and him crucified.

Somewhere in the classic Gritsch/Jensen book on "Lutheranism" they talk about JBGTF the same way. I don't have a copy at hand, so this is from my fading memory. Never preach JBGTF, they say, but preach Christ's promise in such a way that the upshot is sinners made right with God, and thus set free, by trusting that promise.

We LCMS and ELCA types do NOT have a good track record on "proclaiming JBGTF," because we have not done what the Gritsch/Jensen axiom calls for. More seriously, we have not done what Christ calls for. The absence of sanctification amongst us is the best signal for BAD JUSTIFICATION-PREACHING, i.e., BAD PREACHING OF THE GOSPEL, even as we hustle each other to recite our arch-shibboleth of JBGTF.

The quotation above says: "They want to get beyond the assurance of salvation by grace and get to real growth in commitment and

service.”

I wonder. If preaching offers “assurance of salvation by grace,” another of our Lutheran shibboleths, I wonder if the Christic promise is being proclaimed at all. Seems to me better to say that Promise-preaching aims to bring sinners to confident trust in Christ—and keep them there. There is no “getting beyond” that. Or if there is, what is “beyond” confident trust in Christ? What is “real growth” that goes beyond this? What is the “solid food” that supercedes this “milk” of the gospel? Placing add-ons onto the Gospel is the Lutheran definition of heresy. Gospel-plus is what the Galatian legalists were promoting. Paul called it an “other” Gospel.

[Footnote: The Reformers hyped “by faith” (missing in this “assurance” phrase) and not “by grace.” Their critics were all committed to “by grace.” The fight was about faith. Are you 100% A-OK with God “only” by trusting Christ’s promise, or not? One side says yes, the other no. And then the Reformers twisted the knife. Not only is Promise-preaching and faith-trusting the ying-yang of justification, it is the core axiom for sanctification as well! More on this below.]

Suppose we put the best construction on what the author of the quote above was hoping for, possibly even crying for, namely, faith active in love. In old terms, sanctification. And what he was bemoaning is the widespread paucity thereof among US Lutherans. And not just US Lutherans.

That raises the same question that confronted the Lutherans at Augsburg. Their critics hollered at them: “Where are the good works in your version of the gospel? We go to God’s law to fill out the package and get folks to attend to ethics. What we hear you saying all the time is faith, and faith ALONE. When to you ever get around to sanctification?”

Bob Bertram liked to say that this challenge was the real center of the famous Article on Justification (#4) in Melanchthon's Defense [apologia] of the Augsburg Confession. As Melanchthon framed it: "How to commend good works without losing the promise?" His answer: Go back to square one. If good works aren't happening, then the promise has been lost—and along with it faith too. And when faith is gone, so is justification.

To get "fruits of faith" happening again, you need to get faith happening again, and there's only one way to get faith to happen. Offer the Gospel-promise —milky or not. To commend good works, proclaim the promise. Use it or lose it.

Of course, that analysis and proposal was not Melanchthon's invention. He claimed it was straight out of the New Testament—in lots of places. When sanctification-fruits are not showing up on the tree (so says Jesus) the whole tree is sick. You don't "preach" about fruit-bearing under the false perception that the tree is otherwise healthy, that the "rooting" in JBGTF is basically OK. Not so. The rooting is rotten. Fruitless = rootless. JBGTF never happened. Or if it once did, it's long since died.

Needed is to re-root the tree so that it "naturally" bears fruit. "Roots of faith" produce "fruits of faith." So says Jesus. And no surprise, that's the apostolic axiom too. That's what Paul does to/for the Galatians ["you've gotten hooked into an OTHER Gospel, so I've got to go back to square one and proclaim the REAL GOSPEL, the promise, again so that maybe you'll trust it this time—at least for a while. And then the 'fruits of the Spirit' (chapter 5) will come. Nothing else will produce them."]

Ditto for Paul writing to the Corinthians ["You've glombed onto a theology of glory, so I'll have to start all over with you

back to square one, the theology of the cross. And then, not until then, will you be able to get to I Cor 13.”]

Enuf for now. There are two leftovers, at least. One is the matter of just what such “fruits of faith” are. Is there a list? These and these only qualify? I think not. Expecially if, ala Paul in Galatians, “freedom itself is the goal for which Christ has set us free,” then how would you draw boundaries for fruits of Christic freedom? Dostoyevsky teases us with Sonya in his “Crime and Punishment,” a prostitute for Christ’s sake. Is this her sanctification or damnation? Some other time.

Number two is the distinction between law-imperatives and grace-imperatives when it comes to fruit-bearing. I.e., USING, not LOSING, the promise to “get to real growth and service.” That topic has showed up more than once in past ThTh postings. If curious, do a search on the website: <www.crossings.org>

TWO FOOTNOTES

- A. Crossings website. Webmaster Tom Law has run the logs for website traffic during 2004. I’m overwhelmed by the numbers.
1,538 hits per day average. Over half a million for the year.
422,575 pages downloaded by website visitors.
105,448 distinct computers served.
- B. In Crossings’ relief effort for survivors on Nias Island off the west coast of Sumatra \$2,250 was already wire-transferred last Thursday. Contributions may be made via PAYPAL @ the Crossings website <www.crossings.org> or by check to the Crossings office, P.O. Box 7011, Chesterfield MO 63006-7011.

Peace & joy!

Ed Schroeder

