

# In this Season: Light in the Darkness

Colleagues, That was the caption for the Christmas message sent to USA Episcopalians last week by their new presiding bishop.

Here's the text that one of you Episcopalian readers passed on to me.

*Episcopal News Service*

*December 19, 2006 "In this Season: Light in the Darkness"*

*One in a series of occasional reflections from the Presiding Bishop*

*[ENS. Note to readers: With this posting, Presiding Bishop Katharine Jefferts Schori begins a series of occasional reflections for the people of the Episcopal Church. The reflections will also be available on the Presiding Bishop's web pages at <http://www.episcopalchurch.org/pb.>]*

*For the People of the Episcopal Church*

*The Episcopal Church continues to focus on its mission of reconciling the world, particularly as it cares for the least, the lost, and the left out. We participate in God's mission to heal the world as we feed the hungry, house the homeless, educate children, heal the sick, and seek to change the systems that perpetuate injustice.*

*We also seek reconciliation with those within and beyond this church who differ from us theologically. While we regret the recently publicized departures of individuals from churches in Virginia and elsewhere in this Church, and the rejection of this Church's elected leadership by various bishops here and*

*across the world, we continue to seek reconciliation.*

*God is not served by bickering, name-calling, and division. We recall Jesus' prayer in John's gospel, "that they may be one" and understand that to include the whole world – those who agree and those who disagree, people of different faith traditions and none, and the poorest and most broken among us.*

*We will continue to engage in that mission of healing the world, whatever others may decide. In this season, we affirm the ancient dream of peace in our day, shalom, salaam, the peace of God which passes all understanding.*

*May the Prince of Peace shine in your hearts, and may that light bless the world.*

*"The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it" (John 1:5).*

*Shalom, Katharine*

*– The Most Reverend Katharine Jefferts Schori is Presiding Bishop and Primate of the Episcopal Church.*

In taking the Gospel for Christmas Day (John 1:1-14) as her text, the Presiding Bishop [hereafter PB] invites us willy nilly to compare her message with that of the original. The two go in different directions. The PB's message and her Biblical text are not in synch.

The so-called "Johannine prolog," John's chapter one, is not addressing the problem that the PB is. Thus John's Good News addressed to the problem HE is talking about goes elsewhere from where the PB's Good News goes.

It seems clear that the PB throughout her Christmas greeting is

addressing the “horizontal” dilemma of our frazzled world—and frazzled church too, especially in the worldwide Anglican communion today. In classical theological lingo that is looking at the human problem “coram hominibus”—on the human-to-human interface of our lives. People are indeed mean and nasty to each other—all over the world. No argument there. Among peoples and nations things are in a mess.

But St. John is addressing another mess, the one “coram deo,” the horrendous mess at the human-divine interface. In John’s prose God IS light, but God’s renegade kids—the whole human race—always opts for darkness. Since God’s light = God’s own life, opting for darkness is choosing death. The malady that needs healing is this dark primal death-wish. God does it by putting his Light/Life into one of our kind, Jesus, a.k.a. God’s [Greek word] “mono-genes”—genetically unique— “only” Son. You never could get this coram deo dilemma fixed from Moses. It takes resources Moses never had. The one who brings “grace and truth” —truth about our REAL dilemma and grace to heal it—is the Manged Messiah. He is simultaneously God’s genetically unique Son, “close to the Father’s heart.” He’s the only one who can get THE light back on for darklings. When that Light goes on, Life switches on. “To all who receive This One, who believe in his name, God authorizes them to be called God’s kids again.”

Let’s take a look—paragraph by paragraph.

1. “The Episcopal Church continues to focus on its mission of reconciling the world, particularly as it cares for the least, the lost, and the left out. We participate in God’s mission to heal the world as we feed the hungry, house the homeless, educate children, heal the sick, and seek to change the systems that perpetuate injustice.”Comment: All coram hominibus stuff. God’s mission in Christ, ala John, is about a different need for healing. Also a different

reconciliation agenda. Here the PB is using St. Paul's favored metaphor, but misfocusing it. Paul's hoopla about Christ the reconciler is that "God was in Christ reconciling the world UNTO HIMSELF." Same agenda as that of the Johannine prolog with its language about getting the Light back on for chronic darklings.

Yes, the coram hominibus interface in today's world is a mess, but John's prolog claims that if you don't address the coram deo agenda of these messed up humans, you'll make no dent whatsoever on the coram hominibus turf. The "mission" of Christ's church—Episcopal Church included—is commending Christ's coram deo reconciliation to the unreconciled world. That's the Good News that most folks still do not believe. A PB ought to know that—and speak to the coram hominibus mess from that direction. "Direction" is important in theology. In Gospel-grounded theology, which way does the flow go? According to Gospel-theology analysis, the coram hominibus mess of the human race flows FROM the coram deo mess. To fix the former, you first have to fix the latter. In law-theology analysis, it's the other way round. Put simply; if we're not nice to each other we'll mess up our God-connection. Our human behavior generates our God-relationship.

John's Gospel claims that the human penchant for darkness is a given. The God-connection is messed up from the git-go. Old fashioned language called that original sin, namely, that no neonate enters the human race with a clean slate. The mystery of wickedness is that (ala AC II) we all arrive on the scene "not fearing God, not trusting God, and congenitally curved into ourselves.". Ignore this "God-problem" and all your pleading to "feed the hungry, house the homeless, educate children, heal the sick, and seek to change the systems that perpetuate injustice" is a

lost cause. It is “symptom-therapy” that ignores the disease.

Sadly, there is no hint of such awareness in the PB’s Christmas greeting.

2. “We also seek reconciliation with those within and beyond this church who differ from us theologically. While we regret the recently publicized departures of individuals from churches in Virginia and elsewhere in this Church, and the rejection of this Church’s elected leadership by various bishops here and across the world, we continue to seek reconciliation. “Comment: This sentence speaks to today’s world-wide Anglican agony with homosexuality. A month ago it showed up in a Christmas letter we received from a dear Anglican cleric (cum Ph.D. from Oxford) half a world away from us. He told us:

“On the Church front, things are getting rather messy and confusing, thanks by & large to the likes of the Americans ‘invading’ with their unique brand of liberal ‘Gospel’ that is so Old News and a return to ‘slavery’ and all. Of course, all in the Name of ‘Modern Progress’ and ‘freedom’ . . . 2007 has all the signs of being rather too ‘interesting’ and so probably eventful. The great thing of course is that God has seen it all before; so we may trust in the true Head of the Church to carry us through, as we aspire to ‘read’ the signs of the times with His eyes and walk in His steps.”

The PB’s commitment to “seek reconciliation” here is not a request for just “be nice to one another even though we disagree.” She is proposing reconciliation for two conflicting convictions about the Christian Gospel. Those gospels do not reconcile. Nor is it envisionable that consensus will come when one conviction metamorphoses into

the other.

And it's not just in the worldwide Anglican communion, as we all know. At least among American denominations it's all over the place.

It might be instructive for the Anglicans to look at what Crossings writers said in past ThTh postings during the debate on the subject in the ELCA. They proposed a third alternative distinct from both of the two "sides" in the ELCA debate—"sides" identical to the two sides facing off among the Anglicans. Not that this third option has yet had any palpable consequences in the ELCA. But it is a strategy that invites both sides to move to a "better" Gospel-reading than the one they are working with—grounded either in liberal Biblical readings or in literal Biblical readings. This "better" Gospel is a promissory Gospel that gets beyond the Biblicism that plagues both sides—whether liberal or literal. In both of these biblicisms the final argument is "But the Bible simply says so!" One Biblicism hypes the lovey-dovey passages, the other the "Thou shalt nots." The hermeneutics in both cases is the same—a commitment to Biblical authority that concludes in "The Bible simply says so." Neither one starts with the Biblical promise—either in its Abrahamic or Davidic contours when reading Leviticus, or in its Christic format when reading St. Paul.

The dead-end impasse is guaranteed when "promissory" reading of the Bible is bypassed. And there's a reason. T.S.Eliot—an Anglican!—born in St. Louis!—penned it in that famous line "The last temptation is the highest treason: To do the right thing for the wrong reason." Concern for the moral life is a "right thing." So is Christian freedom. But the "wrong reason" in Christian

theology for either of these “right things” is to do so because “The Bible says so.” Eliot’s stern word is “treason.” In this case of the two sides dominating the homosexuality debate, it is treason—now I’ll be stern—against the promise. In Lutheran confessional language it is: “Commending good works and losing the promise.”

[Past ThTh posts on this issue have sought to “commend sexual ethics without losing the promise.” How well we’ve done remains to be seen. If you are curious, GO to the Crossings webpage—[www.crossings.org](http://www.crossings.org)—and on the internal Google option put in the word homosexuality.]

3. “God is not served by bickering, name-calling, and division. We recall Jesus’ prayer in John’s gospel, ‘that they may be one’ and understand that to include the whole world – those who agree and those who disagree, people of different faith traditions and none, and the poorest and most broken among us.” I think this is a misreading of those classic words of Jesus, though it is a “classic” misreading, a constant one throughout the past century of ecumenism. Here the PB expands it well beyond Christian ecumenism to include “people of different faith traditions and none.” On two counts that is not what Jesus is talking about in this prayer in John 17.

First of all, by no stretch of exegesis is Jesus addressing “people of different faith traditions and none.” He is talking to and about those who trust his promise. Muslims and Jews will be the first to say: Not us. Secondly, the “one” in Jesus’ prayer is not arithmetic oneness, communal togetherness. It is single-minded faithfulness, non-duplicitous loyalty, finally, constant confidence in God’s promise. That is the “oneness” wherein Jesus and his Father are “one,” not in unitary identity,

but in “keeping the faith” with each other. That we disciples be “kept in the faith,” faith in the “grace and truth that came by Jesus Christ,” that is what Jesus is praying for throughout the entire chapter of John 17.

This topic too had fuller treatment—including its connection to the classic “Yahweh is one” in the Hebrew “Shema”— in an earlier ThTh posting. You can find it at this URL:

4. “We will continue to engage in that mission of healing the world, whatever others may decide. In this season, we affirm the ancient dream of peace in our day, shalom, salaam, the peace of God which passes all understanding. May the Prince of Peace shine in your hearts, and may that light bless the world.  
‘The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it’ (John 1:5).”

Every reference (sic!) in the New Testament to peace is peace on the coram deo interface. Never on the coram hominibus interface. The same is true about the Light St. John is proclaiming. The PB’s concluding words, if genuinely anchored in John, would have come out something like this: “We will continue to engage in Christ’s mission—in the language of John 20—as the Father sent him, so Christ sends us. The specifics of that sending are to bring God’s peace to unforgiven sinners, to transform runaway kids into the children of God. ‘Peace in our day’ may well be an ancient dream, but it is not what Bethlehem was all about. The Prince of Peace in the manger, as signalled by the angelic messenger, is Peace-maker twixt God and the human race. That agenda is patently not yet fulfilled for the people of this planet. That is the mission of the whole Christian Church, and thus the



mission of the Episcopal Church as well.”

If “peace in our day” amongst conflicting peoples had been his assignment, then the 2 millennia of history since then—to say nothing of today’s headlines—document his failure. But that wasn’t Jesus’ agenda. A far more lethal un-peace was what he tackled, an un-peace that even Moses, the greatest prophet of all, couldn’t remedy. And when Jesus breathed his last “it was finished.” He’d done it. This coram deo peace project got started at Bethlehem—so the Christian Gospel claims. A PB must know that. So why didn’t she say so in this Christmas message? Maybe next year. Goethe’s dying words come to mind: “More light!”

Because of the Bethlehem peace-project . . .

Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

P.S. With four weeks to go Cathy Lessmann, Crossings office manager, tells me that the registration for the Honest-to-God-Gospel conference end of January is now well over 100. There once was a published registration deadline (now passed), and those who followed it will, of course, get to sit in the front rows—even if they are Lutherans! But Cathy doesn’t want to close the door for folks who still want to be there. So forget the deadline, she says. There’s room for 150 at the conference site. If Crossings’ kind of beverage is your cuppa, get thee to the website and sign up.

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# Mortality at the Manger 2006

Colleagues,

This week's post is a sequel to last week's. It too links the terms cancer and Christian—and Christmas. This time not among children in Shanghai, but in the flesh of a dear colleague of mine in N. Mankato, Minnesota, Dennis Ahl. Two months ago the diagnosis came in for him: pancreatic cancer – already metastasized. That immediately brought to mind Dom Helder Camara's caution, sent to me by another Crossings colleague, German pastor Jane Holslag, during my recent optic-nerve unpleasantness: "Say yes to the unexpected that criss-crosses your plans, wipes out your dreams, and gives a completely different direction to your day, yes, possibly to your entire life. These things do not happen by chance. Grant God the heavenly Father the freedom to chart the course of every day." In what follows Dennis tells us of that criss-crossing that came on October 21, and reminds us Whose Chris-crossed Name it is that connects us with that Father.

After seminary graduation (1968) Dennis Ahl taught with us in the theology department at Valparaiso University. It was a one-year appointment to plug a gap of a regular staffer gone on sabbatical. He endeared himself to all of us. He was a gutsy law-gospeller then, and never ceased to be just that in the congregations he pastored in the years thereafter. A few months ago he retired from pastoral ministry. During the decade ('83 – '93) of Crossings weekend workshops – The Word of God and Daily Work – Dennis invited us up to Minneapolis to conduct one with his congregation.

This week his Christmas letter arrived – like none other. We pass it on to you, with his permission.

As contradictory as it may sound, Dennis works the equation:

Mortality at the Manger = Peace and (even) Joy!

Ed Schroeder

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*"Christmas Greetings," I believe what I am about to write is correct. If not, then the logic of what follows is messed up. Medievalists said, 'In the midst of life we are in death.' Luther said, 'Nay, in the midst of death we are in life.' Well, then, I must be in the midst of life because on October 2, I was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer that had metastasized to the liver and the lymph nodes.*

*"There are some real benefits to being on Death Row. People say the nicest things about you, even if it kills them to say such nice things. I feel their pain. I have learned again something I learned before when I broke my right thumb; namely that the common, ordinary things of life of which we are completely unaware are probably our greatest gifts from God. Never before have I ever thanked God for regularity, a crampless gut, and a mouth and tongue without sores.*

*"Before starting on chemo, I felt quite good. I had my usual good appetite, food tasted good to me, and I was experiencing little or no discomfort – just a death sentence hanging over my head. Chemo has turned this upside down. I have come to the conclusion that oncologists believe that if patients have a deadly diagnosis, they therefore should feel deadly. And so they prescribe chemo. The scientist in me would have liked to have split myself into two: One taking chemo, the other not – to compare which route to death would have been more endurable.*

*"Before you waste a stamp on me next Christmas, you had better*

wait for a letter from me because if you don't receive one, the post office doesn't deliver where I will be. Forget that stuff about how they deliver rain or shine...

"In the meantime, if you are praying for me, pray that God would use me as he did the blind man in John 9 to get glory for himself since oncologists are convinced they can't heal me – and even someone as cross-eyed as I would have to see God in his daily life. Or if God does not desire to get glory for himself by me, then pray that I might drink the cup as willingly as his son went to the cross.

"Meanwhile I'll sing the words of a stanza that didn't make the cut when hymns had to be cut to four or five stanzas: 'Laugh to scorn the gloomy grave and at death no longer tremble.' Whenever I have sung those words, two images have come to mind: I see the singer thumbing his nose at death or giving death the finger – for we have in God and the ascended Lord a God whose help knows no boundaries. He can put Humpty Dumpty together again even when all the king's horses and all the king's men can't.

"In the Name of Him who came to save us,  
"Dennis"

[Here's the entire stanza for the two lines that Dennis cites. It's from "Jesus Christ my Sure Defense," which doesn't quite render the German original "Jesus, meine Zuversicht." Zuversicht is confidence.]

Laugh to scorn the gloomy grave  
And at death no longer tremble;  
He, the Lord, who came to save  
Will at last His own assemble.  
We shall rise our Lord to meet,  
Treading death beneath our feet. The original German is

*possibly even feistier:*

*Lacht der finstern Erdenkluft,  
Lacht des Todes und der Höllen,  
Denn ihr sollt euch durch die Luft  
Eurem Heiland zugesellen.  
Dann wird Schwachheit und Verdruß  
Liegen unter eurem Fuß.*

*–Otto von Schwerin 1643*

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## **A Window to Heaven—When Children See Life in Death**

Colleagues:

Dean Lueking, pastor emeritus at Grace Lutheran Church, River Forest, Illinois is on the same graduation picture as I am—Concordia Seminary, Class of 1954. He married well, became Jaroslav Pelikan's brother-in-law. Nowadays he and wife Beverly are working on a book. Something to do with what Lutherans around the world think Lutheranism amounts to in that particular piece of the world they live in. The two of them are just back from several weeks in Southeast Asia, interviewing folks in Korea, Hong Kong, Singapore, China, Indonesia, and maybe more. He sent today's posting to me and told me this: "I met Dr. Liang almost by accident in Shanghai. Bev and I had scheduled an interview with a Chinese nurse (the school nurse at Concordia Intl School Shanghai) for Sunday evening, Oct 29, at 6 p.m. She called before, asking if she could bring a friend – a doctor. Sure, we said.

The friend was Dr. Stephen Liang, who hustled to our hotel room a half hour late...but it sure was worth waiting for him. He blew us away with his zeal, medical competence, warmth of personality and dedication to the kids he serves.

“Dr. Liang has taken the baptismal name of Stephen – being baptized perhaps several years ago. He is a pediatric oncologist working in a Peoples Republic of China hospital in Shanghai. He refers in the piece to his medical school and a leukemia specialty center there (Quongdong?). He has established important connections with USA specialists in leukemia – and did a brief study program at Duke Univ Medical School some time back. I continue in contact with him; he has connected with the worshipping community at Concordia International Secondary School in Shanghai.”

Here’s the message from this young Christian for our edification.

Peace and Joy!  
Ed Schroeder

*P.S. Registrations for the Crossings January conference, “Honest-to-God Gospel,” are pushing 100. Yesterday the third ELCA bishop signed up. Is that a good sign, or not? We think it is. FYI, contrary to Bethlehem, there still IS room in the Inn.*

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## ***A Window to Heaven—When Children See Life in Death***

*I am a pediatrician from China. My name is Stephen. And I have chosen to specialize in pediatric oncology, which means that, however well I do my job, a high proportion of my patients are*

going to be little children who will die of cancer. My experience belies conventional wisdom which says that it is easy to believe in a loving God so long as all goes well. People who experience pain, sickness, and death at close quarters often find themselves moving closer to God rather than away from him. But there are a lot of people whose faith really is dependent on things going well. As a doctor who has been constantly exposed to suffering and death in little children, I would like to introduce those above to real life. In the mean time, many people feel the single most powerful argument against the reality of the love of God is that innocent little children suffer and die. I used to think of myself as somewhere between agnostic and atheist. But through the experience at the bedside of many dying children, I returned to a belief in God and recognized the reality of God's love.

Another point is professional. As a pediatrician myself, I love my profession so much but I am also distressed by the widening gap between doctors and patients. The current generation of doctors is encouraged to keep a distance between themselves and their patients; they are advised to avoid becoming involved with their patients' feelings because of so-called professional dignity. "Patients" have changed to be our "clients" somehow. When I was faced with my first patient who would die, I asked my clinical mentor how we as young doctors were supposed to deal with our feelings about "innocent suffering." He responded that the answer was not to attempt to deal with feelings, simply to do my work and concentrate on that. Hard work, he said, is a good tonic for untamed and uneasy feelings. Her advice seemed good because it appeared to help me through the ordeal. I learned from her to keep my feelings about patients as numb as possible.

One of the side effects of this approach was that my faith began to slip away with each passing child. But I found there

was no way in which we could treat chronic illness in children without getting to know them. And to know them is often to love them. To love a child who will die soon is to expose oneself to the pain of dying. I really want the reinforcement to my own faith that comes from seeing these little ones return to their Lord in the natural way of a child to its parent. Little children do not quickly lose the sense of where they are from, nor do they fear where they are going. It is a special privilege from the Heavenly Father for me to be a means that facilitates peace and preserves hearts untroubled. I have never felt that the story belongs to me. Rather, they are given to me as gifts, and I have tried to be a good steward of these treasures. I just want to share with you a quotation from one brother who died from cancer as a short preface: "For the Christian, the Big C is not cancer, the Big C is Christ."

One of the bitter-sweet privileges of caring for children with cancer is that you grow to love them and bask in that love returned. This love returned is a form of love that is rarely seen on the earth. It is unconditional. Part of that love entails, on occasion, sharing the road toward death. The Bible told us that Jesus rarely used adults as role models for spiritual maturity but often pointed to children when he required an apt metaphor for the kingdom of heaven because children are important in God's redemptive plan for us. I am so thankful that I always ask myself what my life would be like today if I were not privileged to know these dying children. The children's experience did not correspond with anything I learned in medical school, but they did remind me of the words of Jesus that I learned that are recorded in the gospel of John. These words were meant to dispel the fear and sadness Jesus saw on his disciples' faces in the garden of Gethsemane:

"Let not your heart be troubled: ye believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house are many mansions: if it were



*not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also”(John 14:1-3,KJV)*

*Jesus spoke of an alternative to the unsure, uncertain heart—the heart untroubled. The untroubled heart that he described is not achieved by having access to more information about the feared subject. Neither is it the result of an intellectual desensitization to painful words and concepts. This peace is simply a gift. The greatest gift in my life has been in linking the children’s experience to my own. In accepting the linkage, God has ministered to my unsure heart with the gift of hearts untroubled. As I sit by the beds of these children, I have seen God’s love made manifest in this descending way. Peace also has been given to children. “Peace I leave with you,” said Jesus. “My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither I let them be afraid (John 14:27,RSV).”*

*Perhaps only a pediatrician would smile in relief that a patient could earn the privilege to be seen as a child. I hope that when it is my turn to be a patient, I am equally privileged and I hope that I will have the courage to report all the mysteries that excite me.*

*For some of my patients, intellectually and physically they were diminished, but spiritually they were stronger. One of the Greek words in the New Testament for healing implies salvation. Spiritual healing does not restore a person to the place they were before the illness. It provides a more comprehensive health care package. The peace and healing of God that defies human understanding can bring us salvation and keep our hearts and minds untroubled—even when they do not satisfy our analytical inclinations! As I look back now, I am so thankful*

that Jesus dealt with me the way a loving parent deals with a hurt child. He made me reach out to others rather than get lost in myself. Helping others helped me.

But I am also reminded by a parent that belief can be a more painful proposition than unbelief. The unbeliever assumes that no one is responsible or holds an answer. Belief to these parents suggests that there is some One who holds all the answers. For every young heart untroubled, there maybe one and more older hearts left thirsty and unsure. It is my observation that parents tend to see their child's illness most often in terms of their own failure. In fact, when I am asked, "Do you know why children get cancer?" I always assume the real question is, "What did I do wrong that my child got cancer?" In the Old Testament, father Abraham had the outrageous faith to believe that God would honor his promise to make Abraham the father of many nations. In another era, there is also a true Christian who had the outrageous faith to give up his visa to certain freedom and remain in the Nazi-occupied land with his vulnerable parents during World War II. He was able to protect them for several more years and went with them to the camps where both his mother and father met their deaths. He survived to tell his people and the world about self-sacrificing love. God's law and its promises were written on his heart. I believe all the suffering, this dying around us has a meaning. For, if not, then ultimately there is no meaning to survival; for a life whose meaning depends upon such a happenstance as whether one escapes or not ultimately would not be worth living at all. The book of Job gives clues to the meaning of suffering. But we do not really understand this message—in fact, we hardly take it seriously—until we suffer. Our initial knowledge may come from the Bible, but deeper understanding comes only as we put teaching into practice. I am reminded that without the agony of the Cross, the resurrection would have been just as irrelevant

as some contemporary theologians believe it to be.

At the end of 2003, I met one of my patients named John. I tried to be involved in helping his family. I knew he had AML, which is an uncommon kind of leukemia in children and has a possible curing rate of 60% without relapse. But he was in relapse at that time. Also, I heard about another bad news that his mom was diagnosed with advanced breast cancer. This family had no insurance. The hospital was going to release John since his daddy could not pay for the treatment. At the moment, the first person I thought of was Jesus. I felt there was a strong desire in my heart that told me to do something. After a short prayer, I started the journey to be with this family. I visited my friends Amber Young and David Tormey first and asked them whether it was okay for me to seek help from QICF for John and his mom. After a conversation with the representative Dr Ron Halbrooks from QICF, he asked whether QICF could visit the leukemia ward since Christmas was coming. I agreed with their little request.

During the following outreach in the leukemia ward, every visitor was touched that there were so many children with cancer who needed help. John represented all the kids to say welcome and to say thanks to their parents for taking care of them so patiently. I told those who had yet to hear the good news why we were so willing to do that—Christmas Eve is a holy night because Jesus is born to share hope and love with us. When we meet those children who may lose their hope, what should we do? After the outreach, John and his Mom received the best medication. All the brothers and sisters were so excited that John was in remission in a month but soon after that, John was in relapse the second time. I must admit that I was very frustrated when I knew that we really wanted him to stay with us. To be honest, I wanted to quit then. But when I talked to Dr Ron, he told me a true story happened several years ago in

Qingdao.

There was a brother named Robert who started to help a boy with leukemia for 3 years. Robert is not a rich man but he and his wife did try their best. When brother Robert heard that Xiao Bo Yang needed a transplant to finish his treatment, he talked to his wife and made the decision to sell his house in Chicago to help. But Robert passed away just when they made the decision. When local media and churches heard about all that, they were deeply touched by such an awesome American brother's deeds. At last, a local hospital gave Xiao Bo Yang a free transplant also as a gift to Brother Robert who is with his Father right now. Xiao Bo Yang was saved. It is the Father's perfect plan for him to stay. After I heard about this story, I felt I got the answer which keeps on giving me strength. During John's last moment, he mustered the final energy to sit up in his hospital bed and say: "Daddy, thank you so much for taking caring of Mom and me. I do not want to be without you. I want to go home." Then he lay back on his pillow and died. I felt such an utter failure as I heard the news. When I followed the news on line, I cried, almost as though it had been my own child. I strongly believed God had a perfect plan for John through which I had the idea to establish a children's leukemia foundation to help more kids with cancer when I moved to Shanghai.

In Qingdao, China where I used to live, there is a Children's Leukemia Foundation. I did do some work in the foundation and to establish the connection between QICF (Qingdao International Christian Fellowship) and QCLF (Qingdao Children's Leukemia Foundation). During the past three years, because of Him, more and more children with cancer are on the road to recovery. One of the favorite verses from the Bible I would like to share with my patients and their families is Mark 5:36: "Do not be afraid, only believe."

*Let me return to my prayer for my young friend John. It was not an exercise of the head but a demand of the heart. My prayer, "Do you not care at all?" was answered in my heart as quickly as my thoughts blasted the heavens: "Yes, I do care and it's because I care that you are there. And I am there also."*

*Those in the fiery furnace find One who walks with them. Those who walk through the valley of the shadow of death do not walk alone. God, the Parent who so loved the world, became a co-sufferer with all parents who share Mount Moriah's supreme test of faith, through the gift and death of his beloved son.*

*Before my career is complete, there will be many more Johns. I doubt that many of their parents will report that all of their hard theological questions found answers. Neither will I, and we continue to pose some awfully tough arguments. At least when we challenge God, we keep a conversation going. That type of conversation is called prayer. And occasionally in the conversation, God interrupts, so to speak, and gets a word or two in edgewise. To troubled hearts and hearts unsure, there is a window to heaven in the abiding promise that Jesus will come. May our lives be a feast: the spirit of Jesus in our midst, the work of Jesus in our hands, the spirit of Jesus in our work.*

*I would like to end my testimony with this simple witness that God is alive, interested, and loving. I would like to say amen with the children safe in the arms of Jesus. Amen!*

*Dr. Stephen Liang  
Shanghai, PRC*

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# Theology Befitting a Bishop—a Proposal, an Offer

Colleagues

Elizabeth Eaton was elected Bishop of ELCA Northeastern Ohio Synod last Saturday. I do not know her. But I do know one who was on the ballot—and so do you from reading ThTh posts in the past. Jerry Burce, Crossings board member and pastor of Messiah Lutheran Church in that synod was also nominated. As successive ballots reduced the field, he made the final three. When asked what he thought he might do if he got the job, he spoke his piece. It was a peace-piece. I have his permission to pass his peace along to you for your own Advent edification. Preceding that I'll copy his self-presentation posted on the synod website in the weeks before the election. If some other synod has an episcopal vacancy, folks in that synod just might want to read this.

Peace and joy!

Ed Schroeder

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*Preliminary stuff. Northeastern Ohio Synod Bishop Election Committee Bishop Candidate Questionnaire*

*Name: Jerome Burce*

*Please answer the following questions. Answers must be contained to one page and will be duplicated exactly as received and distributed to voting members. Form must be returned by October 20.*

1. Name three gifts for ministry you possess and how they would influence your vision as bishop. Gifts.

a. Long ago some excellent teachers helped me start to understand why the death and resurrection of Jesus is fantastic news for me and for every other sinner in the world today. I've been learning more about that ever since. These days I feel it in my bones as the one, essential gift that we Lutherans have for each other, for the rest of the Church, and for the world.

b. I've discovered over the years that I'm able to pass the gift along, making the Gospel come alive for others especially in my preaching and teaching.

c. When I talk and think with other pastors, many seem to find my contributions helpful, especially on the subjects of reading Scripture and making sense of who we are as Lutherans.

Vision: Luther wrote that "the true treasure of the Church is the Gospel of the grace and glory of God [in Christ crucified]" (Thesis 62 of the famous 95). I see the saints of a growing synod nodding their heads in joyful agreement with this, thanking God that he has made them rich beyond measure with the promise of Jesus. Better still, I see those saints passing the Gospel treasure back and forth between themselves, and sharing it freely with their neighbors, and drawing from it to bless the world around them with mercy and goodness, courage and hope. They're doing this because week in and week out their pastors are making their hearts sing in Christ, and they can't help it. The pastors are doing this, in part because behind them stands a bishop who keeps getting their hearts to sing in Christ as well, making them glad for their work and eager to hone the skills they bring to it.

2. What would be your four priorities if elected bishop?

*First: To encourage the confidence-at every level of the synod, but especially among pastors-that Lutherans do have a treasure to offer the world and the ability to offer it cleanly, without strings, as Gospel capital "G." We are not "just another church." Why? Because the Holy Spirit has seen fit to teach us the difference between the Law and the Gospel and insists that we use that knowledge to make others rich in Christ and to glorify God. Second: To increase conversation about the systems and practices by which the Gospel treasure gets offered and passed around in our congregations. How are pastors and lay leaders going about their tasks? What constitutes a good confirmation program, or adequate preparation for baptism? In all our approaches to daily congregational life, can we identify "best practices" that all congregations would be encouraged to follow? Where is the synod's help and support needed most, and how do we get congregations to take advantage of that support?*

*Third: To strengthen our determination and ability as a synod to offer the treasure in places where it's most needed, especially in the poorer neighborhoods of our region, and to people anywhere who are trying to live without Christ.*

*Fourth: To keep refreshing our pastors and other professional leaders in the joy of their calling, and to visit or otherwise stay in contact with them as frequently and regularly as possible, with particular attention to our younger pastors.*

3. How would you address racism in the Churchwide, synodical



and congregational expressions of the ELCA?

- By approaching it as the stubborn sin it is—not the only such sin that afflicts the ELCA, nor even the most worrisome, perhaps, but still, a sin. Where I encountered it I would address it forthrightly with the Law of God that forbids it and the Gospel of God that overthrows it.
- By pressing for connection and conversation between congregations of different ethnic or racial majorities. Let us eat and talk and pray together in the name of our Lord Jesus. Amazing things will happen when we do.
- By asking why the ELCA, for all its emphasis on ecumenism, has had so little formal conversation with the historic black churches and has done so little to encourage it at synodical and congregational levels.
- By making it a personal priority to thank God for our minority congregations and pastors, and to support their mission.

4. How would you strengthen everyone's knowledge of and participation in synodical ministries?

- By reinforcing good systems already in place, especially the website and the weekly email postings.
- By writing a bi-monthly bishop's column, suitable for re-producing in parish newsletters.
- By strengthening the expectation that pastors and other professional leaders, "the informational gatekeepers," will attend the conference and synod meetings where information is accentuated and prioritized.

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## **Address to the Election Assembly, Northeastern Ohio Synod 2 December 2006**

*The peace of the Lord be with you...*

*Two things happened just now in this little exchange of ours. First, we wrapped each other in some incredible words. Second, in doing so we repeated ourselves; we used words that all of us have used a thousand times before. Both these things, the words themselves and the repeating of them-both cut to the heart of what your next bishop has simply got to be for.*

*Let's start with the words. "The peace of the Lord," we said. It's a stock phrase, a ho-hum sort of thing-until you slice it open and shake it. Then all kinds of wonderful things come tumbling out. The Lord, of course, is the only begotten Son through whom God loved the world and loves it still. Christ Jesus, put to death for our trespasses, raised again for our justification-raised that is to make us right. How right does he make us? So right that the Holy Spirit, looking now on this otherwise motley assemblage of well-meaning Middle Western trespassers has something quite astonishing to say:*

*"All things are yours," says the Spirit, speaking through the apostle. "Whether Paul, Apollos, Cephas, the world, life, death, the present, the future-all are yours." Notice, not all will be yours, not all could, all might be yours, if only you'd make that red-blooded American Christian try really, really to accept Jesus, if only you'd roll up your true blue American Christian sleeves and do some real peace and justice, if only you'd get 20 more people in your pews and the men to sing, then some things, a few things, might possibly be yours-yes?*

*"Please!" says the Spirit. All things are yours. Because you*

*are Christ's and Christ is God's all things are so yours that right now, in this moment you have the right, the power, the authority, the calling, the divine mission to stride the earth as the sons and daughters of God that in Christ you are, forgiving sins in Jesus' name, not forgetting that in forgiving sins you are in fact addressing every human being's deepest need, that all-encompassing need to be all right with God, as all right with God as you are right now, the peace of the Lord being with you, the Spirit says.*

*Tell me, would the people in our assemblies tomorrow be at all surprised to hear this? Hearing it, how many, do you think, would sit there dumbfounded?*

*And now imagine: imagine that all the saints of our synod were taking what the Spirit says for granted. Imagine what they'd look like. Imagine what they'd be doing. I'll tell you one thing they wouldn't be doing. They wouldn't be moping about those high tech palaces the evangelicals keep throwing up. They'd be too busy to mope-too busy telling and living the Gospel of Christ Crucified with a flair, an integrity, that the evangelicals can't match. They aren't steered by the Augsburg Confession. You are.*

*Faith in who we are on Christ's account-that faith comes from hearing, and what is heard comes from the Word of Christ. Stronger faith comes from the Word of Christ incessantly repeated, incessantly heard. At some point in the repetition little Pentecosts happen and the saints catch fire. I've seen it. You've seen it too. Saints on fire, warming the world with courage and mercy, hope and joy, all of it gushing from the good news they hear and tell-that's God's agenda for the Northeastern Ohio Synod.*

*Our former bishop knew this. He served that agenda faithfully*

and well.

Key to the agenda of course are the pastors of our synod. God be praised for each of them. They're the ones who tomorrow will slice open texts and phrases and tumble out the Gospel treasure that makes us all rich. Week after week they're the ones who keep bathing the saints in the bracing Word of Christ.

Only sometimes we pastors don't. Sometimes we're distracted, sometimes bored, sometimes daunted by the gloom and evil that touches our lives too. Sometimes, God help us, we're lazy. Too often we're simply the Peter who can't bear to keep walking on the watery surface of a word too good to be true. He looks out on Sunday at saints, yet all he sees are the empty seats. "All things are mine?" he thinks. You've got to be kidding."

For the sake of God's agenda in our synod, get us a bishop who will be especially for pastors the hand of Jesus lifting us up when we slip beneath the waves. Get us the voice of Jesus commanding us again and again to feed his sheep. Get us a bishop whose words, strong and glad and unrelenting, will be the testimony of the Holy Spirit, that Christ Jesus, crucified and raised from the dead, is and was and ever shall be for us, for all his holy Church, and for the world he sends us to as the Father first sent him.

Once again, and in your discerning: the peace of the Lord be with you.

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# Singing Around the Advent Wreath

Colleagues:

A decade or so ago our church musician at Bethel Lutheran here in St. Louis, Stephen C. Mager, came to Marie and me with the German text of an “Advent Wreath Hymn” that he had found on some recording. He’d written down the text from what he heard, did likewise with the tune. His request: “Could we render the German text into English?” So we did and ever since it’s part of the liturgy at Bethel when the candles are lit on the Advent wreath. We sing only verse 1 on Advent 1. Vv. 1&2 for the two-candle Sunday, etc.

Seven years ago at Adventtide I posted that English translation [ThTh #77], but not the marvelous music. Crossings webmaster Tom Law now tells me he can put the musical notation on the website. And he has. The link to find it is <https://crossings.org/archive/ed/AdventHymn.pdf>

Here’s the text once more—this time in two versions.

NUMBER ONE is our translation of the German original that Mager gave us.

NUMBER TWO is our tweaking that text a bit to make it more sympatico with the Revised Standard Lectionary pericopes for the Advent season.

Since that ThTh posting back in 1999 we’ve discovered the text and tune in a German Lutheran Hymnal published in 1994. It identifies the original artists as follows—Text: Maria Ferschl; Melody: Heinrich Rohr. The date given for both is 1954.

With words and now melody in hand, you too can sing along with

the rest of us as you light your Advent candles in the days ahead.

Peace and joy!

Ed Schroeder

## NUMBER ONE

Original translation of the German text.

M&E Schroeder

Dear Christians, rejoice, for Advent is here,

See the first candle bright and clear.

Attention on these our holiest days:

Prepare your hearts for God's own ways.

Christians, be joyful, with one accord

Near at hand is the Lord.

Dear Christians, rejoice, for Advent returns.

See how the second candle burns.

Now welcome each other in the Lord's name,

For God to us has done the same.

Refrain

Dear Christians, rejoice, for Advent is here.

See the third candle, bright and clear.

Into this dark world your goodness now show.

Let others see your life aglow.

Refrain

Dear Christians, rejoice, for Advent is here.

See the fourth candle, bright and clear.

For truly our God no longer delays;

Let your light shine these holy days!

Refrain

## NUMBER TWO

Verses 2-4 tweaked toward the RCL Advent pericopes.  
Dear Christians, rejoice, for Advent is here,  
See the first candle bright and clear  
Attention on these, our holiest days.  
Prepare your hearts for God's own ways.  
Christians, be joyful, with one accord  
Near at hand is the Lord.

Dear Christians, rejoice, for Advent has come.  
The second candle signals John.  
In our darkness too his message brings light,  
Points us to Christ, from faith, not fright.  
Refrain

Dear Christians, rejoice, for Advent is here.  
See the third candle, bright and clear.  
Our God, three in one, sent Mary his call  
To bear his Son and bless us all.  
Refrain

Dear Christians, rejoice, for Advent is here.  
See the fourth candle, bright and clear.  
The circle is closed, we soon will be fed  
At Bethlehem, God's House of Bread.  
Refrain

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# Thanksgiving – with a Biblical Hebrew Accent

Colleagues

On the second Thursday of each month here in St. Louis the Lutheran Professional Church Workers Conference gathers for worship, program, conversation. I was slotted for the November program segment. "Something on Thanksgiving" was my assignment. But the mini-stroke intervened, and someone else presented on another topic. Yet I had the presentation worked out before my affliction struck. So you now get it for this post on USA Thanksgiving Day 2006. It begins with something I'd been asked to do fifteen years ago for the journal of WELCA (Women of the ELCA). Then follows an add-on that I've learned since then about "thanksgiving" in Biblical Hebrew. The finale was musical—and I know of no way to offer that to you via the Crossings listserve. But I'll still tell you what it was, namely, Heinrich Scheutz's composition on the "thanksgiving-est" Psalm of all, #136. It is 8 minutes of echoing multiple choruses, holy hilarity, noisy sonority. At one point 17 trumpets are playing!

Schuetz composed it for the 100th anniversary celebration of the Reformation, Oct. 31, 1617. Dresden was the venue for the performance. Somebody, some several bodies, should get to work to have it performed again in our land. Even use the next 11 years to "practice" for some wingding performance (in Carnegie Hall?) on the 500th anniversary in 2017. Any takers?

Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

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1. Thankfulness: An Apostolic Afterthought?[Beginning with the article printed in Lutheran Woman Today (Sept. 1991) p. 5-8.]

"And-oh yes-be thankful." These words, tacked on almost as



an afterthought, are a loose translation of the apostle Paul's words in Colossians 3:15-his well-known advice about new life in Christ.

Thankfulness an afterthought? For Christians, that can hardly be true. Or can it? Before we answer, let's examine some New Testament accents on gratitude , thanksgiving, and being grateful-all biblical words that are variations on one "loaded" biblical Greek word, eucharistia (which goes back to the Hebrew word todah-more about that later).

Gratitude. First off, let it be said that gratitude is not an attitude in the New Testament. Nor is it something we do because of the way we feel. It is, rather, an action, a public event. The gospel calls us to thankfulness regardless of how we feel about things, including our feelings about ourselves or about those who receive our gratitude.

The same is true, for instance, in the New Testament Greek term agape, which is not a feeling or attitude of warm fuzzies toward someone. Instead agape is the word that describes concrete help given to someone in need, despite how we might feel about that person. The meaning of agape becomes clear when our Lord bids us to love our enemies, to do genuine good for those whom we clearly don't like. Even if people are out to "do us in," we are called to be Christ's agent and do good for them. So it isn't gratitude, but something else, that motivates people to "do love."

Thankfulness. The same is true for thankfulness. Thankfulness is, in fact, an "after-thought" in that it comes after, or second, in the sequence of Christian living. Faith comes first. It is important to get that

sequence straight and understand the reason for it. Let me illustrate what I am talking about with an example from my childhood.

At Trinity Lutheran Church in rural Coal Valley, Illinois, where I grew up, we sang an old hymn each year during Lent that had Jesus saying these words to us: "I gave My life for thee; What hast thou giv'n for Me?" That hymn brought shudders to me every time I heard it. It shattered. For no matter how hard I tried, my "gratitude attitude" was trivial when compared to Christ's cross.

Christ had done so much for me, the hymn reverberated, and now it was my turn. And it sure sounded to me as if Christ was asking for equity. When instructed that I should do this or that "out of gratitude," I could only look inside myself and verify that, sure enough, I was "out of" gratitude. Not just fresh out. Constantly out.

Through years of grappling with God's gospel, I now know the missing link in the sequence from that piece of childhood piety: faith. I knew Christ had done all that stupendous stuff for me, but somehow it didn't seem to count if I didn't fork over something comparable in return. My constant dilemma was that I was out of gratitude. Small wonder-faith was missing!

Thankfulness is not, strictly speaking, a response to the gospel. Faith is-and the only proper one. The gospel does indeed call for a response. But the response it calls for is this: Trust me. The Lutheran confessions hold that the gospel is a promise. But before we can give thanks for promises, we have to trust the promises. Gratitude is a consequence of trusting. So the Christian sequence is, rightly: Christ's promise to us, our trusting that

promise, then the fruits of faith-a veritable garden of them-one of which is "and-oh, yes-be thankful."

My move from childhood piety to understanding later in life is the switch from what, in theology, we call law-imperatives to grace-imperatives. Or, more simply put, from law-commands to grace-commands. Both commands issue from God, so we dare not say that people initiate the law-commands, while God initiates the other kind. No, both come from God. The big difference is that Christ is in the second set, and not in the first set. And what a colossal difference that is! Law-commands have a prior condition to them: "If you do this for God, then God will do that for you."

Remember the lawyer in Luke 10 who wanted something from God-eternal life-but kept trying to justify himself, finally asking, in effect, "Who is this neighbor I am supposed to love?" In the Good Samaritan parable that follows, Jesus is trying to tell him-and all of us who will listen-that God-in-Christ acts first, justifying all of us who are "half-dead" in our sins. We all need to be rescued from our own ditches, as different as these may be between individual sinners. Then are we freed, and grace-filled, to see that we are neighbors to all kinds of people. We can perform actions of thankfulness and helpfulness, in faithful response to God and on behalf of others.

For in the grace-commands, Christ is primary and comes first. The commands that follow Christ are the consequence-not the condition-of the divine action. The grace commands read like this: "Since God-in-Christ did such-and-so, therefore you do so-and-such." Listen to the pattern in this classic grace-command: "...in Christ God was

reconciling the world to himself... [therefore] be reconciled..." (2 Corinthians 5:19-20). Notice the grammatical pattern in this grace-command: There is a causative character in the first clause: Since / because God was in Christ reconciling the world, therefore be reconciled to God. Whereas the grammar of the law-command is: If you...then God... In the law-command, God responds to my action. In the grace-command I am responding to God's action in Christ. Thankfulness is like that too. It's in the grammar of grace-commands.

But we are not called upon to do something for Jesus. Jesus is not the beneficiary in the action commanded. Nor are we the beneficiaries. As in the parable of the Good Samaritan, other people are the beneficiaries of those actions. (Compare Ephesians 2:13-22.) And all of the action issues out of God's grace-initiative, flowing from folks who trust it.

The law-commands are something we've "got to do;" the grace-commands are something we "get to do." The former involves coercion, even if it is the gentle coercion of "look at all the goodies you'll get." The latter has no coercion at all, but rather Christian freedom! The former lays assignments upon us with built-in sanctions; the latter opens new doors for innovative sanctification. We get to choose the good we are eager to do for another! Thanksgiving is one of the grace-commands that no one can really tell us how to do, though conversation within the Christian community can help shape us as we seek to do our faith-filled response.

Perhaps my earlier words about the "gratitude attitude" were overstated. Attitudes are important for how we live and act. But if our attitudes, even our grateful ones,

remain only inside us and are linked to how we feel, then Christian thanksgiving is not yet happening.

The book of Psalms grasps the point well when, in Psalms 106, 107, 118, and 136, it repeatedly advises us to “go public” with our faith-filled response: “Oh, give thanks to the Lord.” Why? “For God is good.” How good? Good enough that “God’s MERCY [I’m sticking with the old King James Version term, for reasons we can talk about later] endures forever.” Thanksgiving really is an after-thought, for it is after encountering God’s mercy in Christ, and trusting it, that we go public. In biblical thanksgiving, there is always an audience, for someone outside the thanksgiver is on the receiving end when thanksgiving happens. And that Someone Else is not just God, but all the other folks round about who are listening in on this public announcement.

Even if no one thinks to ask us what is going on, we can tell them anyway. Look what God-in-Christ has done for us! God gives us gifts in our lives. We receive them and we can give them away.

Thanksgiving is one Christian proposal for going public with what has been private experience. It’s no big deal. It’s simply faith in action proceeding from the center of our being to the edges of all the crazy-quilt patchworks that are our lives. Or as the apostle Paul might have put it, “Oh, yes-by the way-be thankful.”

2. Something I’ve learned since then. I’m going to take the NT Greek word *eucharistia*, regularly rendered as thanksgiving, to be the translation for the core Hebrew word for thanksgiving: *Todah* as the noun, *Yadah* as the verb. Fred Danker tells me that even in today’s spoken

Greek eucharistia is the standard term for saying “thank you” to anybody about anything. We want to get back to the Hebrew roots for this biblical term, and that pushes us back into the Psalter, as I mentioned before, including the main psalm I want to eventually get to, Psalm 136. But first let’s look at the New Testament usage.

Perhaps with one exception, not once in the 33 uses of the word eucharistia does the root word eucharist – either as verb or as noun or as adjective – refer to the Lord’s Supper. The one possible exception is in the words instituting the Lord’s Supper. All three synoptic evangelists say “He took bread and gave thanks,” or “took the cup and gave thanks.” But that is standard Jewish piety at any mealtime. Jesus “gives thanks” before feeding the five thousand in the synoptics. St. Paul “gives thanks” when, washed ashore at Malta, he invites his fellow survivors to join him for a meal. And there are a number of other such instances. Nothing sacramental. Just daily bread.

I know there was considerable hullabaloo about this when the eucharistic prayer was brought into our Lutheran Book of Worship. And I don’t remember all the arguments. But if no one of the 33 NT references uses eucharist as a synonym for the sacrament, what are the grounds in evangelical catholicism for doing so?

3. Claus Westermann, Heidelberg (Germany) Prof. of Old Testament, writing on the Psalms in Interpreter’s Dictionary, calls attention to “the many lexemes for praise” in Biblical Hebrew, and the difficulty to render them into modern languages. They are multi-valent by comparison. So also the Hebrew term usually rendered as “thanksgiving, O, give thanks,” in the Psalter, namely, yadah , the verb, todah, the noun, the term with which Ps.

136 begins and ends: hodu leJHWH (you plural – y'all – give thanks to Jahweh). Remembering, however, that this is a Hebrew verb of public praise, maybe even standing on a soapbox to do so, it's not "now write a letter to Grandma thanking her for her Christmas present." It's something public and plural. It's a verb of praise. Gesenius thinks the Hebrew word yad (=hand) might signal the acknowledgement of someone else's mighty and assisting hand. One thought I have related to that is the idea of "raising one's own hand" in response to the word/act of another, thus affirming that person, saying "yes" to the person/action. Similar to the Latin word confitemini with which Jerome translated hodu. From which we get our English term confess, that is itself a multi-valent verb (Christians confess such opposite realities: confessing sins / confessing faith). But in all cases Biblical confessing is yes-saying to a prior word/act of God. (God says: "Adam and Eve, you are sinners." We old Adams, old Eves: "I confess my sin." Or again, God says: "This my Son is meant for you to trust." Whereupon we "same-say" what God has just said to us: "We confess our faith/trust in that Son meant for us.")

In both cases the receiver of the prior divine word is saying yes to it. So the NT term for confess (both for sin and for faith) is homologia / homolegein (=saying the same thing) "same-saying" what God said prior to my homo-logy, my same-saying it. That means there are at least two audiences for this "verb of praise." One is God. The other is all the other folks who are together with me in this "y'all" doing the action, as we will see when we get to Schuetz's setting of Ps. 136.

And that signals yet a third audience. All those who are listening in on our thanksgiving, but who weren't (yet)

involved in the original saying / same-saying exchange between God and the first batch of same-sayers. There's the soapbox, the marketplace, the public forum. Here the door opens for the super-hype that Schuetz puts on the whole action of giving thanks. The thanks-givers are on a roll. That holy hoopla is just "normal" for what the verb wants to convey. 17 trumpets!! Several choirs bouncing the "todah" around – almost as though they cannot stop.

4. I want to conclude by having us listen to a recording of Heinrich Schuetz' choral setting of Psalm 136. The historical background is that Schuetz composed this and directed it at Dresden, Germany, on October 31, 1617, the 100th anniversary of the Reformation, Luther's posting of the 95 theses on the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg. That is the date often given for the "beginning" of the Reformation in Germany. This Psalm is unique in the Book of the Psalms in that every one of its 26 verses of thanksgiving ends with "For his mercy endures for ever." Schuetz shows what Westermann said above. "Thanksgiving" is praise. It is public. It is extravagant. You might even say it is "noisy." At one point 17 trumpets are playing along with the several singing choruses—back and forth. I know of two Compact Disc recordings of this music. The one we will listen to comes from Weissenfels, Germany.

I have printed the text out for you—the original German, the English parallel—so you can follow along and join the musicians in thanksgiving. Thanksgiving is not something to lecture about. It is something to do. So let's join Schuetz and the musicians in "doing" our own thanksgiving to God as they lead the way.



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# **“God Loves You” or “Christ Forgives You” – Which One is Gospel?**

Colleagues,

Timothy Hoyer, ELCA pastor at Gloria Dei Lutheran Church, Lakewood NY, is not a timorous Timothy. Though you might get the opposite impression upon meeting him. Perhaps a clone of “Clark Kent, mild-mannered reporter for The Daily Planet,” you might think. Not the full Timothy. He has been featured on ThTh posts before—often in response to some less-than-Gospel mantra circulating in his denomination, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. He has a law-gospel-distinction antenna that works like a mine-detector. Well, he’s at it again. He sent this in to relieve “Uncle Ed” —he’s the son of Marie’s brother—a bit in my continuing cyclops affliction. And he’s playing hardball, challenging the goodness of the widely-cherished mantra “God loves you.” Now wait a minute, Timothy, we want to say. That’s a direct quote from the Bible! Especially St. John’s Gospel and First Epistle. What could be wrong with that?

Though he doesn’t make explicit linkage to Bonhoeffer’s own classic caveat about “cheap grace,” that is what Timothy is saying: “God loves you” talk in our day is grace-talk, sure, but it is cheap grace. For the same reason that Bonhoeffer cited in the Lutheranism of his day. It’s grace without a cross—both Christ’s cross and the cross he invites us to shoulder as we follow him.

But what about all those passages in John? Check them out. There is no God-loves-you talk in John's theology without the cross-qualifier. Classic John 3:16 says it plain and simple: "God loved the world IN JUST THIS WAY [says the Greek] that he sacrificed his Son to rescue us who are perishing and link us to the Life that lasts." I John 4:10 ditto. No sloppy "agape" from God for sinners. "Costly" grace, costly love.

But I'm usurping Timothy's turf. Read on.

Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder

P.S.

One of my brightest and best sem students from Ethiopia (way back in 1995) has just registered for the January Conference. He's Dinku Lamessa. Dinku is now National coordinator

Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus  
University Student Ministry (USM)

Addis Ababa. Ethiopia

EECMY is the fastest-growing Lutheran church in the world, now the largest Lutheran church in Africa. Their "church-growth" secret? This mantra: "If you're baptized, you're a missionary." And those "merely" baptized believe it, and do it.

I hope a bunch of you can be with Dinku and the rest of us for this festival. Specs on the Crossings website.

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## ***“God Loves You” or “Christ Forgives You”***

*When “God loves you” is the gospel, then faith is not given because Christ is not proclaimed; the law is shriveled; there is no inner struggle, and so people think that there is no daily moment-to-moment need for Christ. After all, God loves them.*

*‘God loves you’ is used as a gospel by ELCA institutions. Luther Seminary in Minnesota has as its theme, “God Is Calling You.” Outdoor Ministries’ program for 2007 has as its theme, “Listen! God Is Calling.” The proclamation that God is calling can be good news only if the gospel is “God loves you.”*

*However, even with love, the calling of God can cause fear. Adam was afraid when God called him. “But the LORD God called to the man, and said to him, ‘Where are you?’ And he said, ‘I heard the sound of thee in the garden, and I was afraid...’” (Gen 3.9-10 RSV).*

*Adam and Eve had fear because they did not love or trust God. Their love and trust had been switched from “in God” to “in the serpent.” The serpent’s word mattered more to them than God’s word. The serpent’s words of “you will be like God” were better than being created, placed in the garden of Eden, and being gifted with, “You may freely eat of every tree in the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat.”*

*Adam and Eve’s consciences were troubled. “I was afraid, because I was naked.” They were troubled because they did not have trust in God, not just because they ate the fruit, but because they had taken their trust away from God. Trust, once taken away, cannot be put back. It is forever broken.*

*So, how can the gospel be, “God loves you”? That gospel is*

proclaimed when the law is shriveled from "For in the day you eat of it you shall die" to "That's okay. God loves you just as you are." The law is made to be fake. The law does not really warn that we shall die nor cause us to die. Worse, God, who spoke the warning, is made to be a liar. "God loves you" changes the law from a curse into a list of rules to help you do what is right. If you break a few, that's okay, just try harder next time.

Even death is made into God calling you home to a better place. God so appreciates our effort to try harder that God gives us heaven.

Christ is not needed. God loves you.

Then Christ has died for nothing.

The witnesses of Christ tell the details of Christ's suffering and death with enormous emphasis. Christ died for a reason, a serious reason. That reason was that we had taken our trust away from God and as the consequence God had sentenced us to death. The law exists to accuse us of stealing our trust from God, not to just tell us what is right. The law exists to tell us that God has put the curse of death on us. The problem is not that it's hard to believe that God loves you when life gets tough. The problem is not that God loves you as if it is God and us against life, God and us against the bad things of life, against evil, and against death. No, life is from God, the bad things are of God, evil is of God, and death is of God.

Only God's forbearance, God's looking over our theft, God's promise to make things new between God and us again keeps God from giving us ten disasters an hour. Luther says: "To the others, who would like to keep their conscience clear, we have this to say: God has thrown us into the world, under the power of the devil. As a result, we have no paradise here. Rather, at

any time we can expect all kinds of misfortune to body, wife, child, property, and honor. And if there is one hour in which there are less than ten disasters or an hour in which we can even survive, we ought to say, 'How good God is to me! He has not sent every disaster to me in this one hour.' How is that possible? Indeed, as long as I live under the devil's power, I should not have one happy hour. That is what we teach our people" (Luther's Works, Vol. 46, Whether Soldiers, Too, Can Be Saved, Page 117).

"To keep our conscience clear" is why people proclaim "God loves you." But it is to make our conscience clear without using Christ, and thus without realizing how much of disaster we are really in.

The problem is that God "has thrown us under the power of the devil." God is against us thieves. The Gospel of Christ forgiving us by his death and rising is how we are saved from the disaster of God throwing us into this world under the devil. Christ redeems us from the devil. Christ is God's new way of dealing with our stealing our trust from our relationship with God. Christ ends God's curse, ends our stealing, buries them, and then creates us brand new, to live by forgiveness and love instead of by rules and a hiding of the disaster with the words, "God loves you."

By Christ forgiving us, we face, at the same time (simultaneously sinner and saint), God's curse and Christ's forgiveness, we face stealing faith and having faith, law and grace, the old person who steals and the new person who is forgiven. We face our desire to steal for ourselves and renouncing ourselves, we face doing things because we are threatened by a curse and we face the freedom in Christ to act in love as he did. We face the call of the curse cursing us when we steal or no cursing if we don't steal; and we face its

opposite call which is the call of mercy. We face death and resurrection. In other words, every moment is cursed and every moment is forgiven. There are two valid calls calling us. Both calls are God's calls. The first call is God's judgment and curse. The second is Christ forgiving us. Which call calls us more loudly into its relationship with God?

When "God loves you" is proclaimed, there are no two claims, just God's love. There is no law and Gospel, just mush. There is no death and resurrection, just "God proves he loves you by Jesus dying for you." Thus, Jesus' death is not an ending of God's judgment, but only proof of God's love that has always been there. "God loves you" makes Jesus' death and rising another and a last attempt by God to try and convince us that God does love us. That makes us no better than a teenage boy telling his girl friend, "You say you love me. Prove it." God then has to do all sorts of antics to prove his love. And we decide whether God has proved it or not. We have thus kept our trust to ourselves. There is no need for us to hear the gospel, to be given faith. There is no faith in the call of mercy over the call of the curse. And faith is the only answer that gets us God's love.

And when disaster becomes tragedy, "God loves you" is ineffective good news. It only makes people ask, "Then why is God letting this happen to me? God must not love me. What have I done to deserve this?" No comfort of the conscience is given.

The two claims we face cause a struggle within us. Which one do we trust? Faith in Christ, in God's mercy, in resurrection, in mutual love, is created in us when we hear Christ forgives us. All the time we are hearing that we are cursed and judged, that retribution is how life works, that fairness and justice are best. All those things make us feel naked. We hear them all the time because they are real, and valid, and from God. Only the

*spoken word, the speaking of Christ's promise, the giving of that promise in the Lord's Supper, counteracts the opposing words. Thus, we need to hear them, faithfully, so that we do not weaken and become subject to unfaith, to our own way of stealing.*

*The original disciples lived hearing God's curse. One day Jesus came to Peter, to James and John, to Matthew, and he called them. "Follow me." They did not hide. They did not fear. They immediately got up and followed Jesus. His call overcame the call of God's curse, and now overcomes the call of "God loves you."*

*Christ's mercy calls you. Christ's death and rising call you. Christ's forgiveness calls you. "You are witnesses of these things." Those are calls ELCA institutions can use.*

*Timothy Hoyer*

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## **Images of Home**

Colleagues,

With one eyepatch—as double-vision persists—I can peck at the computer keyboard, but not always at the right keys. Pastor Robin Morgan (presently interim at Peace ELCA, Washington MO) offered to give me a rest. So she sent something for this week's ThTh posting. Thank you, Robin. She and husband Hal have been providing home hospice care for Hal's father, who this past Sunday breathed his last. Peace to that household.

One more item. Cathy Lessmann, Crossings office honcho, says that several dozen registrations are now in for the January Honest-to-God-Gospel conference. Of course, she and the committee would like to see more. So would I. There's room for over 100. Prompts this item of whimsy from me. Just 10 days before OUR conference in January the ELCA is pulling together a consultation group of major leaguers to brainstorm a major study on Lutheran Hermeneutics for the national church. Imagine that! Even more, imagine this: One of the speakers for OUR conference is (mirabile dictu!) ALSO in that consultation—and (according to the grapevine) possibly one or two other Crossings law-and-promise types.

A big shortcut for the ELCA, of course, that would save beaucoup bucks too, would be for all these folks simply to come to our conference a few days later. There we could “show and tell” them what we've learned—lo, these many years—in appropriating and practicing the Augsburg Aha! of law/promise hermeneutics and alert them to our website piled high with more of the same.

But that's not going to happen, so we better not wait hat in hand. Yet YOU could be right there up front by participating in our get-together in January. Even more we'll be able to ask that “double agent,” our conference speaker who will just have been there, to tell us what happened.

So if being with us in January is possible for you, send Cathy your registration. Now that I'm 3 days into my 77th year, that keynote I'm slotted to present might just be my swansong. “Two or three gathered” is the Gospel's own specified adequate size for attendees. Yet even more coming to join in the law/promise festival would be even more fun—surely even more Gosselly. For full specs see our webpage <[www.crossings.org](http://www.crossings.org)> Click on the Conference 2007 box. Don't miss the full program specs in this [Brochure](#). Y'all come.



## **IMAGES OF HOME**

*The word “home” is one that invariably stirs our souls, one way or the other. Whether the word repels us or warms our hearts, home calls to each of us from the deepest longings of our being.*

*The artist Thomas Kinkade has developed a huge following (and no doubt made a fortune in the process) by tapping into this deep longing in his work. Most of his paintings, whether focused on the holidays or some other bit of Americana, center on home. Kinkade captures our desires for home in paintings of gauzily lit cottages covered with just the right amount of snow at the end of winding country lanes or Victorian mansions with perfectly landscaped lawns on cobblestone streets that draw the eye and compel the emotions to yearn for such perfection. Whether in the city, the countryside, or the small town of our imaginations, he provides the illusion of home where everyone is loved and safe, where life is as it should be.*

*Are these oil and canvas replicas really representations of home? Many of us continue to hope that such perfection is out there and if we just work hard enough or protect what we have with sufficient dedication we will be able to create such a place for ourselves and those we love. Others of us have long since given up trying to find our way into these illusions of home. Either we hang the paintings on our walls with a wistful sigh or mock the very idea of caring about such naïve*

*fantasies.*

*But the longing remains. Without belaboring the societal shifts in families and the mobility of our culture, we are a nation on the move and dreaming of home.*

*How does the Christian community address this longing? In the past, we welcomed people into our home, the congregation. Our stable, moral and well-structured communities offered solace and familiarity to new immigrants recently arrived from the same European countries our families had left behind. Be part of our congregation and find home again, here in the new world – that was the church's most effective evangelism tool.*

*Today, that is no longer working. The immigrants who are crossing the borders today are from the south and across the Pacific rather than the Atlantic. Our version of home has little or nothing to do with whatever images of home these people are bringing to our country.*

*Our own progeny, raised in the world created by our forebears, have walked away from their ethnic heritage into the brave new world of melting pot America where "Friends," "The Simpsons" and "American Idol" are the touchstones that inform their lives. Yet the longing for home persists, otherwise Kinkade would not be so successful.*

*Does the Christian community have the resources to address this need within humanity?*

*One first place to look is in Psalm 84. "How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord of hosts! My soul longs, indeed it faints for the courts of the Lord; my heart and my flesh sing for joy to the living God. Even the sparrow finds a home, and the swallow a nest for herself, where she may lay her young, at your altars, O Lord of hosts, my King and my God. Happy are*

*those who live in your house, ever singing your praise.”  
(verses 1-4)*

*Of course, the psalmist goes on to talk about highways to Zion through the valley of Baca as any of us would when thinking of a specific place, a specific way of life that we call home, where God dwells. This, I believe, is part of the struggle we face in the church today. Those of us who grew up inside the structures of our own Zions where our families lived and God dwelt, have a hard time conceiving of God dwelling at the mall or among people who don't sing our songs or pray our liturgy. In my corner of the Christian world, I believe that the intellectual critique of unfamiliar music and prayers is as much about our need to keep our image of home intact as it is about theological improprieties.*

*What happens when we allow our institutional structures to take the place of the God the structures were built to serve? God is allowing our structures to crumble around us. Are we going to crumble along with the buildings?*

*Sometimes I feel silly, even sadistic, pointing out this painful reality again and again. Yet, it seems we need to hear these challenging words from a myriad of angles until they break through our intellectual defenses. We have ourselves so well barricaded inside our mental structures that we hardly realize that we have been left homeless. The gaping God-sized hole in our souls is at the core of our being where the lost little boy or girl is crying and running, looking for the street leading home.*

*It is the Homeless One in Matthew 8, “Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head,” who calls out to us, “Follow me, and let the dead bury their own dead.” He knows what it's like to be*

*without a home in the midst of his own people. He knows what it's like to be alone in the face of overwhelming societal pressure. He died a most humiliating death, not the death of a King, but the death of a criminal. He was raised to new life so that those of us who open our hearts to Him might have a new home in his arms wherever He may lead us.*

*Our forebears are written in the Book of Life, God will never forget them. It is time for us to take what they gave us and make it our own. It is time for us to move into the future, at home in Jesus' arms.*

*The Homeless One in Matthew 8 healed a leper, He healed the centurion's servant, He healed Peter's mother-in-law. He calmed the storm, cast demons out of two people and was run out of town because of it. Life with the Homeless One isn't easy, but it is what we were created for. Our meaning, our purpose, our true home is in his arms where the Father carefully and tenderly holds us all. Our destiny is laid out before us. Home awaits with open arms.*

*Robin J. Morgan*

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## **Insiders / Outsiders at the Lord's Supper**

Marie here: Ed's health is improving, but there's still a way to go. Headache is gone, nausea gone. Double vision persists (ergo computer incompetence), and weakness.

He suggests we send to you Brian Heinrich's "Street Ministry" newsletter we just received. Brian's been on these pages before – Ed's TA from Seminex days, Canadian Lutheran, street priest for Lutheran Urban Mission Society (LUMS) in Vancouver BC. His topic here is the regular Saturday gathering for Holy Communion and for a meal hosted by different congregations in the area and served to all who come from the streets where Brian has been all week. Years ago we both were there making the rounds together with Brian. It's straight out of the New Testament. And so is he. But he reminds us as you read on that that's true about all of us who follow Christ.

Ed's been debating whether to offer something for this American election weekend that would speak to the chaos in our country and elsewhere in the world – at least some of which is occasioned by our country. But that's such an apocalypse. His alternate notion was to draw attention to that Amish community (Lancaster PA) who sure look like Jesus in their forgiving response to the murderer who butchered their children. He says "I know as a goldie-oldie Lutheran I shouldn't be siding with the Amish. But here they may be more Lutheran than some of the rest of us are. They have no scheme for making our country into a Christian nation, or the world into a Utopia of peace and justice, prosperity and democracy. Luther, too, was against such idealogical madness (megalomania) for saving the world. The world's salvation is only in the theology of the crucified Messiah who brings peace on earth in those places where the people trust it (those Amish folks) and in places like Brian's Vancouver – and, we hope, in your midst as well. Not in Bush's vision or yours or mine, or Constantine's, or Mao Tse Tung's, about heaven on earth. That's why Luther always expected Christ's return at any moment, for in 16th-century Europe, too, the Constantinian Christ was the model for the rulers. And the real Christ is clean contrary to that one. Luther knew that.

“Christ’s kingdom is always local, where his Gospel is trusted. As soon as you want to globalize it without the Gospel itself as the agent to make it happen, you have to invoke an ‘other’ gospel. All the megalomaniac schemes in world history have had to use some other gospel. And they all end in apocalypse now. For Hitler’s Germany, for Stalin’s USSR, for the American empire extended into the Middle East.”

Now listen to Brian. He’s talking about the one and only Gospel there really is.

Peace & Joy!

Ed and Marie

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## Street Ministry

We have never taken a money offering at the LUMS eucharists we have celebrated over the years. And frankly I’m surprised that, especially during our more recent bouts of financial aridity, none of the LUMS board members has succumbed to the pressure & suggested to me that we reverse that early-established tradition.

Perhaps initially it was because we considered it ridiculous to ask money of the urban poor we were serving & insensitive to solicit those who already were so generously giving by coming to participate in serving the banquet. But as the years have progressed it has become clearer that the offering we bring to our worship is ourselves, making other offerings derivative & redundant.

The distinguishing borders between worship & service have become blurred among us. Our physical service has become worship, acts of devotion. Not surprising, I suppose, considering the Matthean

scripture (25:31ff) that undergirds our mission. When serving the hungry, ill clad, unwell, displaced, vulnerable & disenfranchised we expect (Luke 12:35-40) to meet our incarnate Lord as really as Mary in the garden (John 20:11ff) or Peter on the sea shore (John 21).

Occasionally in our community the group coming to help us host the meal doesn't understand this profound connection between our worship in the eucharist & the subsequent animated mission that ensues. Fortunately not frequently, the majority of the serving group might not choose to come into the chapel for worship, remaining aside in the gym. Or sadly, thankfully rarely, the group might come to chapel but due to theological imperatives remain en bloc in the pews & not join us around the altar for eucharist. Our worshipping community is diminished by these occasions. It kind of knocks the breathe out of you. There is a failure to recognize (1 Corinthians 11:17ff (esp. vs.28f)) that the meal service is an extension of the worship & the Christ encountered in the eucharist is the same Christ incarnate in His vulnerable siblings. The two are inseparably intertwined & indistinguishable.

Recently a group served a meal of a Saturday morning. While waiting on tables I overheard one of the guests complain about the food ( quite exceptional, as we usually get rave reviews in the 'hood – our meals have a good reputation), ( specifically, too meager meat in the pasta) initially I was burned that he should be so ungrateful ('twas his second helping!). Fortunately I didn't do further damage by engaging. I only thought it in my mind. But later in reflection, I thought I should have said, "I am sorry you are disappointed, brother, we try to do our best. I will pass on your concern to our cooks. Hopefully your next experience will compensate." That would have been the appropriate response to an honoured guest's disappointment.

The story doesn't end here. That same morning, one of our regular volunteers overheard one of the hosting servers say as food was dispensed, "this food looks good, almost good enough for us." Later the volunteer mentioned the troubling comment to me. I pointed out that we both had sat down toward the end of the meal with the last stragglers-in & had eaten of the "almost good enough."

Tellingly, not incidentally, this host group resists participating in Communion. There is a failure, in Pauline language, to discern the Body (1 Corinthians 11:28ff). The Body is consubstantially Christ's Body & the living organic community, in all its woundedness & even unattractiveness, a motley crew & the shared gifts of bread & wine, very Body & Blood! They are inextricably intertwined & enmeshed. To sever Christ from His Lifegiving sacrament is not possible, His Body, His Blood. Likewise Christ affirms He is to be found in the needy poor; service to the poor sibling is "you did it to Me."

In the scripture we listened to at Liturgy that morning (1 Corinthians 4:6-15) St. Paul used a number of telling adjectives; "left outside," "the last," "foolish," "weak," "nobodies," "hungry, thirsty, illclad, homeless, & abused," "insulted, cursed & slandered," "disposable, scum-of-the-earth" to describe his apostolicity. He was authenticating his apostolic office by these identifiers! Because, if we pay close heed, we will recognize these are the very marks of The Sent One (that, amazingly, even after the resurrection He bears to identify Himself to us!!!).

Recently I was asked to animate a series of lunch-hour conversations at Christ Church Cathedral, the topic being "Rich & poor together here on Georgia & Burrard streets." In the initial session we talked about rich & global, then the next time poor & local. To my relief when I asked who around the



table considered themselves rich, everyone agreed we were privileged. Unlike that past Saturday when folks from the non-communicating group identified themselves as “spiritually poor,” to my shock. If we fail to acknowledge our privilege we are of course unable to recognize our own need to own & participate in the wounded body of Christ.

The superscription to our LUMS inclusivity statement is the third article of the creed. That is to say, we understand inclusivity to be an explication of our confession of the gathering activity of the Holy Spirit. Communion is not incidental, but constitutive.

There is a movement afoot in christianity today to usurp the Divine prerogative & expel those prejudged disfavoured. We are heirs of just such an historic expulsion. Reformationtide celebrates our owning the derisive epithet “protestor” much in the same healing way the marginalized homosexual community has owned & redeemed its “queer” slur. Yet there remains an underlying sadness that communion is fractured, the undoing done.

Communion is about trusting God. Communion is allowing God to be God (Matthew 20:1ff (esp. vs.16)); Luke 15:11-32; Matthew 13:24-30/36-43). After all, God is the one who invites us all to participate in His Divine Life. Who are we to exclude those we don't particularly fancy? That belongs to the Host alone. And as these scriptures consistently warn, it is the excluding who will to their surprise & consternation find themselves left out (Luke18:11), self-excluded.

The service we render here each Saturday morning is a confession of faith. It says we embrace the Divine Generosity that has apprehended us, & that caught up in that Grace, we cannot help but embrace the wounded Christ as He comes to us in challenging

guises. We welcome unreservedly & find ourselves embraced too.

...in the Communion Christ enables among us,  
your street priest  
pastor brian

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# **Luther's Theology of the Cross is Not a Theology of Suffering**

Marie here. Medication for Ed's symptoms—headache, nausea—are working pretty well., But the double vision persists, and overall weakness and wobbliness too. We appreciate greatly the cards and e-mails we've been receiving. You are a "great cloud of witnesses."

Ed talking now, Marie at the computer. For this Reformation Day posting we have dug back into the "barrel" and come up with one from our mission days in Singapore in 2004, which did go to you as ThTh #314, June 17, 2004: "Theology of the Cross. A Singapore Congregational Presentation." Comes now a new and "improved" version. Well, maybe.

The request from the Singapore Lutherans was to link the theology of the cross to the "modern world." I don't remember how it happened, but something in Singapore triggered in my mind the notion that Luther's theology of the cross was NOT about pain and suffering, but about something else. Since the antithetical term to theology of the cross is theology of glory, the key image in "cross" must be "un-glory, shame, dis-honor, worthlessness" and not the horrendous "ouch" we moderns associate with "cross and suffering." Even apart from my current

malaise, that idea keeps recurring. Most recent trigger for that was the book sent for review from Augsburg Fortress: Cross Examinations: Readings on the Meaning of the Cross Today, Now dyslexic – even worse double-lexic – I can't really read it, but from the chapter titles that Marie has read to me, it looks like "cross" is the metaphor for pain and suffering. I don't think so. Nor do I think the New Testament supports that notion. Nor does Luther in his famous Heidelberg Theses of 1518.

So Marie and I, after her reading the Heidelberg Theses to me again, have pasted together a revision of the Singapore piece to make the case that "cross" equals something else – for sure, in the Heidelberg Theses, and also in the "scandal" of the cross in New Testament language – with this week's Reformation Day posting.

Peace and Joy!  
Ed Schroeder

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## **The Cross for the Modern World**

### **Queenstown Lutheran Church, Singapore**

### **March 24 and 31, 2004**

1. Is the Cross "old" and the world "modern?" Or is it just the opposite? Depends on what you think "Cross" means, and what "modern" means.
2. What does "modern" mean in today's world? Are East and West the same in their "modernity?"
3. Martin Luther's words about what it means to "have a god" in the First Commandment apply to modernity – "Western modernity" for sure, possibly also "Eastern modernity." What people "fear, love, and trust" is the actual god they have, regardless of what they say they "believe" – or

“don’t believe.” “Fear, love, and trust” are verbs of the heart, not of the head. Human reason comes second. It “serves” the gods that we “fear, love, and trust.” And they are usually plural. Any one of us may have several going at the same time.

4. That is people’s “practical” theology in any age – modernity included.
5. Finally, said Luther, there are only two sorts of theology. It makes no difference if they are “modern” or not. The two alternatives are “theology of the cross” or “theology of glory.”
6. The key text for Luther in his Heidelberg Theses is 1 Corinthians 1:18 – 2:5. 1:18 For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. 19 For it is written, “I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.” 20 Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? 21 For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. 22 For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, 22 but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, 24 but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. 25 For God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength.  
26 Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. 27 But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; 28 God

chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, 29 so that no one might boast in the presence of God. 30 He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption, 31 in order that, as it is written, "Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord."

2:1 When I came to you, brothers and sisters, I did not come proclaiming the mystery of God to you in lofty words or wisdom. 2 For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified. 3 And I came to you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling. 4 My speech and my proclamation were not with plausible words of wisdom, but with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power, 5 so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God.

#### DIAGNOSIS: The Bad News in Theologies of Glory

1. Daily Life in Glory TheologyLiving by "wisdom of the wise, discernment of the discerning, the scribe (Jewish religious expert), the debater (Greek religious expert). Seeking signs (of moral achievement, the Jewish religious goal), desiring wisdom (the Greek religious goal)."
2. Trusting Glory TheologyHaving "faith" in moral achievement (Jewish) or religious insight (Greek). No faith in the scandalously immoral and absolutely "moronic" (Paul's actual word) Cross. Christ crucified a stumbling block.
3. The God-Problem in Glory TheologyNot knowing the God who was crucified, the God who saves, 1 Cor. 1:31. Perishing. God shames the wise, shames the strong. God destroys the wisdom of the wise, reduces it / them to nothing.

NEW PROGNOSIS: The Good News of the Theology of the Cross

4. Saved by the [Weak] Power of Christ and His Cross  
Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength. The foolish wisdom, the weak power, the shameful glory of "Jesus Christ and him crucified." The consequences: "righteousness and sanctification and redemption," which heal the God-problem of #3 above.

[Paul's own proclamation of that Christ and his cross also carries the same trademarks—weakness, trembling, no lofty words of wisdom. His very biography – the "loser" apostle, harried from one town to the next – replicates his Lord's own biography, and that Lord's own theology of an unglorious God.]

5. Called to Faith  
Called by God to find the "source" of your life in Christ Jesus. Resting your faith in the power of the crucified Christ.
6. Boasting in the Lord  
Living from that Source in a world full of theologies of glory. Demonstrating the Spirit and power in your own weakness and in fear and in much trembling. Living the cross's "wisdom, righteousness, sanctification and redemption" in daily life "in the modern world." We hear that in order to be a superlative person in Singapore you must have 5 C's: cash, credit card, condo, car, country club. Any time you need to bring along your own credentials to be somebody, you're stuck in a theology of glory. But that's just as much the case in my country – and then the calling of being Christian in the face of it all – as it is in yours, and maybe even more so.

[In 1 Cor. Paul contrasts "cross" with "glory." "Cross" is the ultimate shameful way to die. Ergo, the theology of the cross is a theology of the unglorious God. It's not focused on horrendous suffering, though that's the way Mel

Gibson took us in his super-movie. Remember, important people were executed by the daggers of other important people in the Roman Forum. "Worthless" villains were dragged out of town and crucified.

Paul is doing here in 1 Cor. 1 and 2 what John does throughout his gospel. This un-glory, Christ's cross, is paradoxically the actual glory of God, Christ the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Do you know any other theology that makes such an offer?]

## The Heidelberg Disputation

Brother Martin Luther, Master of Sacred Theology, will preside, and Brother Leonhard Beyer, Master of Arts and Philosophy, will defend the following theses before the Augustinians of this renowned city of Heidelberg in the customary place, on April 26th 1518.

### THEOLOGICAL THESES

Distrusting completely our own wisdom, according to that counsel of the Holy Spirit, "Do not rely on your own insight" (Prov. 3:5), we humbly present to the judgment of all those who wish to be here these theological paradoxes, so that it may become clear whether they have been deduced well or poorly from St. Paul, the especially chosen vessel and instrument of Christ, and also from St. Augustine, his most trustworthy interpreter.

### [GOOD WORKS]

1. The law of God, the most salutary doctrine of life, cannot advance man on his way to righteousness, but rather hinders him.
2. Much less can human works, which are done over and over again with the aid of natural precepts, so to speak, lead

to that end.

3. Although the works of man always seem attractive and good, they are nevertheless likely to be mortal sins.
4. Although the works of God are always unattractive and appear evil, they are nevertheless really eternal merits.
5. The works of men are thus not mortal sins (we speak of works which are apparently good), as though they were crimes.
6. The works of God (we speak of those which he does through man) are thus not merits, as though they were sinless.
7. The works of the righteous would be mortal sins if they would not be feared as mortal sins by the righteous themselves out of pious fear of God.
8. By so much more are the works of man mortal sins when they are done without fear and in unadulterated, evil self-security.
9. To say that works without Christ are dead, but not mortal, appears to constitute a perilous surrender of the fear of God.
10. Indeed, it is very difficult to see how a work can be dead and at the same time not a harmful and mortal sin.
11. Arrogance cannot be avoided or true hope be present unless the judgment of condemnation is feared in every work.
12. In the sight of God sins are then truly venial when they are feared by men to be mortal.[HUMAN WILL]
13. Free will, after the fall, exists in name only, and as long as it does what it is able to do, it commits a mortal sin.
14. Free will, after the fall, has power to do good only in a passive capacity, but it can always do evil in an active capacity.
15. Nor could free will remain in a state of innocence, much less do good, in an active capacity, but only in its passive capacity.



16. The person who believes that he can obtain grace by doing what is in him adds sin to sin so that he becomes doubly guilty.
17. Nor does speaking in this manner give cause for despair, but for arousing the desire to humble oneself and seek the grace of Christ.
18. It is certain that man must utterly despair of his own ability before he is prepared to receive the grace of Christ.[THEOLOGIAN OF GLORY, THEOLOGIAN OF THE CROSS]
19. That person does not deserve to be called a theologian who looks upon the "invisible" things of God as though they were clearly "perceptible in those things which have actually happened" (Rom. 1:20; cf. 1 Kor 1:21-25),
20. He deserves to be called a theologian, however, who comprehends the visible and manifest things of God seen through suffering and the cross.
21. A theology of glory calls evil good and good evil. A theology of the cross calls the thing what it actually is.
22. That wisdom which sees the invisible things of God in works as perceived by man is completely puffed up, blinded, and hardened.
23. The "law brings the wrath" of God (Rom. 4:15), kills, reviles, accuses, judges, and condemns everything that is not in Christ.
24. Yet that wisdom is not of itself evil, nor is the law to be evaded; but without the theology of the cross man misuses the best in the worst manner.[GOD'S WORK IN US: THE RIGHTEOUSNESS OF FAITH]
25. He is not righteous who does much, but he who, without work, believes much in Christ.
26. The law says, "do this", and it is never done. Grace says, "believe in this", and everything is already done.
27. Actually one should call the work of Christ an acting work (operans) and our work an accomplished work (operatum),

and thus an accomplished work pleasing to God by the grace of the acting work.

28. The love of God does not find, but creates, that which is pleasing to it. The love of man comes into being through that which is pleasing to it.

#### Some Reflections—

1. Theology of the cross for Luther is not primarily focused on suffering, either God's or our own, as is often claimed today. Medieval theology before the Reformation had already "celebrated" suffering (monastic theology, "humility" theology) and turned it into a glory-theology, a super-way to be saintly.

2. The contrast – cross-theology vs. glory-theology – came from Paul's language in 1 Cor. 1 & 2. Christ's cross is the very center of our "righteousness, sanctification and redemption."

3. Just six months before the Heidelberg meeting of the Augustinian monks, Luther's 95 theses on indulgences – back up in Wittenberg – had been a bombshell. When the German chapter of the Augustinian monks gathered for their annual meeting, they asked Luther: "What are you doing up there at Wittenberg? What's the fuss all about? What's this business about justification by faith ALONE?" [hereafter: JBFA] Perhaps the clearest signal of what they were doing in Wittenberg were the 97 Theses on scholastic theology that Luther had published just a few months before his 95 Theses on indulgences. They were dismantling scholastic theology, from A to Z. The indulgence theses applied that critique of scholasticism to a major piece of practical theology in everyday church life.

4. Just as Paul was not wrestling with the problem of suffering in his debate with the Corinthian super-apostles (glory experts), so also Luther in his work of reformation. Theology of glory is not the opposite of suffering—for Luther or for St.

Paul in 1 Corinthians. Instead it is the antithesis of JBFA. Luther didn't tell his Augustinian brothers: Hey, we've got a new theology of suffering up there at Wittenberg that's got everybody excited!

5. When Luther uses the term theology of the cross, there is "ouch" involved, pain and suffering. But the focus of the "ouch," the pain, (on GOD'S side) is the cross of Christ. Here the second person of the Trinity accepts the suffering. The focus on OUR side is the crucifixion of the Old Adam / Old Eve in every one of us, something ultimately to be desired for our salvation. Only once does the word suffering occur in the 28 Heidelberg Theses. And it's Christ's suffering recommended as the lens for "comprehending the visible and manifest things of God," i.e., what God's up to in the world.

6. This double crucifixion (Christ and our sinner self) is needed for JBFA to happen at all. Thus the theologian of the cross "tells it like it is" on the primal human agenda, the topic of "us and our salvation." The glory-theologians have no understanding of this. They are on a completely different page, as we would say today.

7. The 28 Heidelberg Theses come in four topical groups: 1-12 Good Works. 13-18 Human Will. 19-24 Contrasting Theologies of Cross and of Glory. 25-28 God's Work in Us: the Righteousness of Faith. All of that was the new stuff that was whirling around Wittenberg. The antitheses are scholastic theology vs. cross-lensed theology, that is, "natural" knowledge of God brought to completeness by God's grace (the nature-grace paradigm of scholasticism) vs. the scandal of running all theology through the needle's-eye of Good Friday (the law / promise paradigm of the Reformation Aha!). No wonder it brought conflict. These are two different universes. But they do intersect as alternate proposals for Christian salvation. Yet they are eons apart.

8. Now to the theses themselves to highlight the central focus of each group. Remember Luther calls them “paradoxes.” [Webster’s dictionary defines paradox: “Contrary to expectation. A statement that is seemingly contradictory or opposed to common sense and yet true.”]

### 8.1 Theses 1-12: Good Works

*1. God’s law (actually a very good thing) makes human righteousness unattainable. No one can measure up even to the first commandment. We all have false gods.2. Yet without God’s law, just on our own efforts, righteousness is even more impossible. That’s a paradox: what then is the law good for?*

*3. Even “good-looking” works carry a “deadly” label, because they are produced by sinners, people “dead in sins.”*

*4. God’s works don’t look “attractive” (e.g., Christ on the cross), yet they are of eternal value.*

*5. Human works are not deadly in the sense that they are wicked actions, such as crimes.*

*6. The works God does through humans are not of value in the sense of being untouched by sin.*

*7. Works of faith-righteous people would be deadly sins if done apart from “pious fear of God,” i.e., apart from acknowledging that even my super-best doesn’t measure up to God’s performance criteria.*

*8. Even more are human works “deadly” when arising from my own “self-confidence” and not from fear of God.*

*9/10. Some say: Works done without Christ are “dead,” but not “deadly.” Not true. Fearing God is absent in such works, and that is always “deadly.”*

11. Without acknowledging God as the critical judge of every work, arrogance arises in sinners, hope in God flees.

12. In the sight of God sins are then truly “venial” [= non-damning] when we fear that they may be mortal (damning). Another paradox.

## 8.2 Theses 13-18: Human Will

13. After the fall “free will” is a fiction. Even “doing the best it can,” it always does “deadly” sin.<sup>14/15</sup> After the fall “free will” can theoretically do good, but in actual fact always does evil. For it is now the will of a sinner, someone who now is God’s enemy. That enmity marks every action of that will. There’s no innocence.

16. Such a person, believing that God will give rewards for “doing your best,” is doubly guilty.

17. Is this just super-pessimism, super-negativism? Promoting despair? No. It’s simply a clear factual diagnosis to arouse a sinner’s desire for Christ.

18. Despairing of our own ability to be OK with God opens us for humility, and then for Christ’s grace.

## 8.3 Theses 19-24: Contrasting Theologians of Cross and of Glory

19. No “genuine” theologian looks into creation for “invisible” things about God (supernatural power, glory, wisdom – all those “omni-” adjectives we learned about God in our catechisms).<sup>20</sup> The “genuine” theologian centers the search for God in [Christ’s] suffering and cross. Everything about God, but everything, must pass through the needle’s eye of Good Friday. [You can see what an agenda this laid out for the Reformers:

*“Everything theological must pass through that needle’s eye.]*

*21. Glory theologians call bad things, e.g., the “true facts” of human inability for salvation, good, as though they are resource for sinners to work with, and good things bad. Cross-theologians speak the truth about what things really are, e.g., the horror of Good Friday is the glory of God, Christ the Lamb taking away the sins of the world.*

*22/23. The wisdom that glory-theologians are seeking results in making them even greater enemies of God. They never find the Cross-of-Christ center. Thus they are defenseless before law. The law criticizes them to death.*

*24. Yet wisdom and law are not bad things in themselves. But without the theology of the cross we use good things for evil purposes. Large sections of scholastic theology cannot survive the squeeze of going through the needle’s eye. If this be pessimism, then so is the cancer doctor’s news that his patient is smitten. But to cover up the deadly fact is criminal malpractice indeed. And for sin’s affliction there is healing.*

#### **8.4 Theses 25-28: God’s Work in Us: The Righteousness of Faith**

*25. Righteousness comes not from “much doing,” but without any “doing,” it comes from much Christ-trusting. 26. Law says: Do this, yet it never gets done. No one ever fulfills the law, not even commandment #1. Grace says: Trust Christ, and the whole salvation agenda is “finished.”*

*27. In good works of a Christian, Christ is the Doer and we are the Done-deed, God-pleasing because of the Doer.*

*28. [Contrary to what Aristotle says] God’s love is not activated by lovable-ness in the object of God’s love. God loves what’s unlovable, namely, sinners – that makes them lovable.*

*Human loving runs in the opposite direction. It arises when we encounter something inherently lovable: I love Bach; I love ice cream. But God loves sinners. That's the center of the theology of the cross: un-glorious God loving shameful glory-empty sinners, bringing us all back home via a beloved Son's criminal biography.*

But it works! So, where's glory? Boastable glory? "Let him who boasts, boast in THIS Lord."