

Luther and World Christianity

Colleagues,

Not long ago Philip Jenkins (Distinguished Professor of Religious Studies and History, Penn State University) startled some folks with his book *THE NEXT CHRISTENDOM* (Oxford University Press, 2003). Jenkins argued that “global” Christianity was “moving south” and that the “next” Christendom – already on the scene throughout the southern hemisphere – was quite different from, and would eventually supplant, the “standard model” found in Europe and North America. He proposed four theses.

1. Over the past half century the centre of gravity of the Christian world has moved decisively to the global South.
2. Within a few decades European and Euro-American Christians will have become a small fragment of world Christianity.
3. By that time Christianity in Europe and North America will to a large extent consist of Southern-derived immigrant communities.
4. Southern churches will fulfill neither the Liberation Dream nor the Conservative Dream of the North, but will seek their own solutions to their particular problems.

Not long ago missiologists in Europe asked for responses to Jenkins. I did so, but my essay didn't make the final cut to appear in the published papers coming later this year. So it winds up—divvied up—as this week's and next week's ThTh postings. ThTh 407 looks at the first two of Jenkins' four theses. Next week's ThTh 408 the last two.

Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder

TITLE: Philip Jenkins' Global Christianity Viewed through Luther's Lenses

INTRODUCTION.

In this essay I propose to sift Jenkins' four theses through the sieve of Martin Luther's mission theology. That proposal itself might strike some as strange, even some Lutherans, since the common wisdom among missiologists is that Luther had no mission theology. Maybe, maybe not. But he did have some specific things to say about Christendom, and about the Christian Gospel, and about that Gospel's moving to places where it had not been before. That approaches Jenkins' agenda.

PART I: CHRISTENDOM MOVING SOUTH

JENKINS' THESIS #1. Over the past half century the centre of gravity of the Christian world has moved decisively to the global South.

LUTHER: Some caveats about "Christendom, Global Christianity, the Christian world"

"Global Christianity, Christendom, the Christian world"—all three terms more or less synonyms—are the focus of Jenkins' reportage and projections. In academically-tinted missiology of both the southern and the northern hemispheres, one of the three, "Christendom," is almost a dirty word. It signals Constantine's mistake when the Christian faith became the official faith of the Roman (previously "pagan") empire. Mandated Christian faith is an oxymoron. Imperial organization of that faith in top-down hierarchy is also a self-contradiction. "Now" we know that. So any continuation, let alone expansion, of that sort of "Christendom" for the

missiological academy is an absolute no-no.

[Whether that perspective in academe is also true at the grass roots of formerly “established” Christianity is not necessarily the case. In some places definitely not. Many voices in the USA yearn for “Christendom.” A Christian nation, Christian values, a Christianized social fabric—continues as an ideal devoutly sought by many, with costly political and promotional efforts to make it so. Some critics of the USA’s regime-change warfare policy in the Middle East detect a “Christendom” undertow there as well. Especially if the shibboleths accompanying the venture, “freedom, democracy, (yes, even capitalism)” et al. are claimed as Christian values.]

Luther’s critique of Christendom. The ambidextrous God of the Bible.

The very title of Jenkins’ book, The Next Christendom, would cause Luther to raise an eyebrow. He did not think that Christendom—surely not of his day, and unlikely in any other day—was a good thing. In his view Christendom is a nemesis to the Christian Gospel. By definition, he thought, the Gospel never leads to a “-dom” or “-ianity” of any sort. However one might define “Christian world, Christianity, Christendom,” Luther was skeptical of any proposal for establishing a Christian general culture, specifically if “the Gospel” was claimed as the cornerstone for it all. His own lived experience in culture-wide “Christian” Europe with its bi-polar ruling ellipse of the Roman Church in symbiosis—sometimes friendly, sometimes not so—with the Holy Roman Empire, had eventually convinced him that such an all-pervasive wall-to-wall Christian culture was at odds with the Gospel—at least in its Latin form in the Europe of his day. How so?

Although God is indeed one, Luther came to understand that

God's work in the world is not unitary, technically speaking not simplex, but duplex. Recompense and mercy—though patently divine operations—are not synonyms. Following Biblical patterns of God-talk, especially Isaiah & Jeremiah, Paul & John, and the Letter to the Hebrews, Luther came to see God at work in the world in ambidextrous fashion. God works with the left hand creating and sustaining creation—especially the stop-gap rules-and-regulations needed to preserve a sin-fractured world. God works with the right hand redeeming [literally, “regaining ownership of”] that same estranged creation with its now actively antagonistic human creatures, and bringing the whole business back “home” and thus back to its own health and wholeness, a.k.a. salvation and righteousness. Not an easy job, even for God. Whereas God's left-hand work —keeping the planets moving, the cycle of seasons on earth, the sunrise, the teeming oceans, the birds and bees, even the flow of human generations—seems effortless for God, the right-hand agenda was costly, very costly, costing God his own beloved Son to bring it to fruition.

For this right-handed work God's promissory covenant, at least as far back as Abraham (maybe even to Noah and Adam) in the Hebrew scriptures, fulfilled in the crucified and risen Messiah, was the foundational scriptural centerpiece. It was God's “Word” as Gospel. For the left hand, the Sinai covenant of old with its debit-credit “*sum cuique*” orderliness and God's on-going “law written in the heart . . . accusing and excusing” those who'd never heard of Sinai was the “other” divine word, Law, that animated it all. The medieval merger of an imperial church and a “holy” empire blended what God distinguished. Christendom contradicted the word and work of God. Yes, one and only one God, but from that same God, two distinctly different words, two differing covenants, two different “*diakoniai*” (agendas), constituting two different

creations—old and new. Same one Rex, but two different regimes, so sharply different that when confronting sinners, one constituted a death sentence, the other life that lasts.

That made any totalitarian worldly regimes, even and especially ones that called themselves “holy,” suspect. Since an ambidextrous deity was the operations manager, and since the one and only place where God’s two regimes intersected was at Christ’s crucifixion, in his body on a tree, any Christendom that claimed to unify those two disparate divine operations within itself was out of order. And Christendoms always seek to do that. Luther saw this “in spades” in both church and state—Holy Roman Church, Holy Roman Empire—of his day. Both went beyond their God-given jurisdictions in implementing God’s diverse regimes. The churchly institution divinely authorized for God’s right-hand work operated unashamedly within the left-hand realm, even applied left-hand coercive rubrics in its own proper churchly agenda, thus violating the non-coercive Gospel at the center of Christ’s own mandate: “coercive authority? It shall not be so among you.” And the holy Roman empire—from the emperor all the way down to the peasant level in its own secular hierarchy—merely with its claim to holiness, but even worse with its fingers constantly in God’s churchly right-hand agenda, was violating its authorization to be about the Father’s left-hand business.

So the model of Christendom that prevailed in the 16th century was abusive of the Gospel. Both institutions that constituted the Siamese twins of Medieval Christianity, Empire and Church, by virtue of putting their “hands” where they did not belong, were nemeses to God’s right-hand regime of getting sinners forgiven, getting them joined to Christ, and thus becoming the body of Christ, the core definition of what church is. Luther also observed that this confusion of jurisdictions was also the bane of God’s left-hand regime. When God’s appointed left-

handlers pursued church politics, they were shirking their duties in caring for the creation.

So is no “Christian society” possible? Well, that all depends. If/when secular authority sticks to its God-given agenda of God’s left-hand caring, preserving, equity-justice work, then you do have the matrix for a godly society, though not a “gospelly” society. When left-handers keep their hands off of soteriology, they are doing the right thing. A “Gospelly” society is what the body of Christ is. Right from the start that society has no political or geographical borders, so no one prince can possibly have authority there—by definition. The one and only authority of that body is Christ, the head. There are no secondary rulers in that regime, since every other participant is but a member. It is a very very flat hierarchy—one head, everybody else equal. And even that head is not situated above the members, exercising authority “over” his underlings, but is himself “beneath” them all, serving “and giving his life as a ransom for many.”

God’s right-hand regime—on earth just as incarnately as the left-hand regime—appears first of all on the divine-human interface (*coram deo*) where God’s mercy trumps God’s justice, new creation overtakes preservation, in short, right-hand trumps left-hand. Now comes stage two. From this “pebble” (see below) dropped into the pool of God’s left-handed world, the gospelly society called church is created, and from that pebble ripples emanate. God’s right-hand regime is replicated over and over again on the human-human interface where these mercy-managed (former) sinners now enact the very same agenda *coram ho minibus*, their face-to-face interactions with fellow humans. That is the paradigm. For more on this ripple-effect, see below.

But that does not constitute a Christendom. Godly left-handed

societies are what all societies are called to be, and in some cases to achieve, even with no reference to God's other "gospelly" right-hand agenda. From what Luther had heard of Suleiman the Magnificent, he thought that Suleiman was operating a godly left-hand regime among the "Turks." And there was no Christic Gospel in his regime. Luther excoriated Suleiman's murderous onslaught against the Holy Roman Empire to extend Islamic faith. That was, of course, an abomination—Suleiman invading soteriology, a violation of his God-given jurisdiction. His right-hand worked wickedly, but his left-hand —*mirabile dictu*—did not. If he had only stuck to that "secular" this-world calling, he would have been above reproach. Clearly no attempt at a Christendom, just a good, yes, Muslim, ruler exercising his godly vocation.

[The lands in which the Lutheran Reformation prevailed sought to organize public life and church life according to these rubrics. Some did better than others, e.g., electoral Saxony for a while. But here too sin did not cease to blur the edges. It was not a "separation of church and state," but an awareness that faith is a matter of the heart and thus inaccessible to any legislation or coercion, whilst rules and regulations, and coercion if needed, was proper—yes, god-given—in the body politic. Constantinian Christendom makes faith a "you gotta." In left-hand right-hand Lutheranism it was a "you get to, but you don't have to" be a Christ-confessor to be a legal citizen.]

Christendom in Luther's thought cannot escape authority conflicts—at the most fundamental level. Political authority, Caesar's rightful authority, is (the Latin word) *imperium*, Christ's authority is (also Latin) *dominium*. Here are the antitheses: authority over vs. authority under; you serve me vs. I serve you; When the crunch comes, you die to preserve my life vs. when the crunch comes, I die to preserve your life.

Political and social structures are patterned as imperium—and rightly so. The structure in the body of Christ is only dominium. To live in both at the same time—as all Christians do (but not-yet Christians don't)—brings tension. This tension is fundamental, because the differing divine regimes are at the base. This side of the parousia it is never totally resolved. But it is endurable, even victoriously so—because of the Gospel.

SUMMA: If southern Christians eschew a new Christendom as Christian “gravity” moves toward them, they may model a church/society pattern that northern Christians—so long as there still are some—never yet achieved. Luther could help them in the project.

PART 2: EURO-AMERICAN CHRISTIANS A MINORITY

JENKINS' THESIS #2. Within a few decades European and Euro-American Christians will have become a small fragment of world Christianity.

LUTHER: Why be surprised? The Gospel is God's Platzregen, a thundershower. It moves to new fields when the old fields cease bearing fruit. As God's pebble dropped in a pool, its ripples keep moving. The pebble's impact persists.

A. Shrinkage in the North. Has the Gospel itself moved South?

Shrinkage in the north, luxuriant growth in the South? Luther might say: Why be surprised? But if that is so, there is a message there for the north: Physician, heal thyself. Platzregen and pebble dropped in a pool were images Luther used to talk about the Gospel. In his theology just what is “the Gospel?”

>From Luther's primal “Aha!”—actually a hermeneutical

breakthrough beginning with Scripture—about the difference (discrimen, in Latin) between God's law and God's gospel, about God's bi-vocal speech and bi-vocational work in the world, came his understanding of what the gospel was and was not. Gospel is God's own regime-change at God's interface with sinners. Gospel is the profound, yes startling, substance of the Kingdom of God in NT rhetoric. It is God's own switch, God's own regime-change, from left-hand "counting trespasses" to right-hand "your sins are forgiven." It unfolds initially as Christ befriends sinners, but then expands to God's entire fractured creation. That is what's really "Good" and really "New," for example, when St. Mark teases us with his opening words: "The Beginning of the Good News of Jesus Christ the Son of God." When "Jesus came to Galilee proclaiming the Gospel of God," THEN "the KoG was drawing near," THEN "the time was fulfilled." Jesus makes KoG happen. He enacts it. No Jesus, no KoG. So Luther understood the uniform witness of the New Testament. The KoG is the Gospel, Good News of God's own regime-change with sinners and the ripples that flow from that.

That was one of Luther's folksy pictures for the Gospel—and for its territorial expansion across the world. It is for him a mission metaphor. Not that missionaries bring the Gospel to places where it has not been, but that the Gospel itself is the power-pack. The Gospel is the power of God for salvation. It brings the missionaries to places where it hasn't been before. They don't "organize" to make it happen. The Gospel organizes them to make them witnesses. If the Gospel is indeed burgeoning in the southern hemisphere, it's not the missionaries who did it. It is the Gospel itself rippling its way south of the equator.

Luther, like New Testament witnesses, hypostasized the Gospel. It was for them a living entity. As the Word of God, yes, the FINAL Word of God, what else would you expect? Like all Words

of God, the Gospel is not print on a page, but a Voice speaking, breath in motion, sound reverberating. Luther's pebble image merely translates the airwaves into watery ones.

Another of Luther's favorites for the Gospel, also a moist metaphor, is "Platzregen." From the OT prophets (his main lecture turf at Wittenberg University) Luther was taken by references to a "drought of the Word of God" in Israel's worst times of distress, God's most severe affliction on his apostate people. That drought would only be broken when God, *sola gratia*, sent his "Platzregen," a surprise thunder shower, a cloudburst, to refresh his apostate people with mercy and forgiveness, and thus revive faith and the fruits thereof.

That applied all the more, thought Luther, to the fulfilled Gospel in Christ. It too (ala John 3) "comes and goes where it listeth," apart from human ingenuity or engineering. But its movement is not arbitrary. There is a rationale. When the soil on which it showers bears fruit, it stays. Precipitation persists. However, when no produce comes forth, when faith dies, no longer grasping the mercy offer, and faith's fruits do not follow, God moves it elsewhere. Just like a summer cloudburst it passes on to other fields, "and you do not know whence it comes or whither it goes."

If the Gospel is indeed inundating the southern hemisphere these days, its fruitful operations there, Luther would doubtless say, signal the opposite for the "old" fields of (formerly) Gospel-watered lands up north. Christian shrinkage up north and growth down south is not just social geography, it may also be theological geography.

B. Testing, testing, testing: Which gospel is burgeoning, which one shrinking? Remember the Remnant.

But the Gospel Platzregen cannot be verified by numbers.

Already in ancient days (OT and NT) the faithful were more often than not a “remnant.” The multitudes went for other gospels. Other Platzregens also existed—already within the first generation after Jesus’ departure. Many of the NT writings confront such other gospels, other gospels that drew large numbers. So a quality check is called for with every spurt in membership numbers. Jesus himself already alerted the disciples to other agents sowing seed into the soil where the Gospel also had been planted. And the other sowers had their Platzregens too to germinate and nurture their other-gospel plantings. Heresy and schism were first-generation realities in the history of the church.

Luther saw other gospels palpably present in the Europe of his day. The very church that he grew up in, that educated him, that ordained him, was itself afflicted with the bad seed of other gospels. Though baptism (except for Jews) was universal in the Holy Roman Empire, the empire was a mission field—his own dear Germany probably the foremost. A Pelagian “gene” had gotten into the gospel-seed that was sown, that was believed by the faithful, and a churchly institution had evolved whose practices aided and abetted that bad seed and the bad faith that it generated.

If there is a “center of gravity” (Jenkins’ term in the first thesis) for things Christian, it is not found in population statistics. It is located where the Gospel is. Determining just what the authentic gospel is and what “other” gospels are has been a constant agenda of the church’s life and history from the beginning.

Even in our time, with a century of ecumenical encounter and significant rapprochement, there is no consensus among Christ-confessors as to what is “the” and what is “other” gospel. Early on in Luther’s professorial life, his fellow Augustinian

monks asked him to tell them at their annual assembly (1518) in Heidelberg just what THE Gospel was that was generating the hubbub at Wittenberg. He framed his response by contrasting “theologia gloriae” with “theologia crucis” and offering that either/or for testing all proposed gospels. He’d borrowed the terms, he said, from Augustine and specifically from St. Paul’s own vocabulary in 1 Cor. 1. The widespread Pelagian-infected Gospel of the day wound up under the glory-theology rubric, and the Christ-alone, faith-alone Gospel (no surprise) came in under cross-theology. Lutherans still claim that this set of alternatives works for “testing the spirits”—and the gospels of our day. But not all are convinced.

Already in the second decade of the Reformation era the Wittenberg reformers applied this test in a grass-roots “visitation” of parishes throughout Saxony where many of their own graduates were parish pastors. And the results were horrendous. Both among parishioners and among pastors theologia gloriae was winning hands down. Luther grasped for stop-gap measures—a Small Catechism for household fathers, a Large Catechism for pastors—to cope with the catastrophic findings. The temptation was to legislate theologia crucis for the errant Saxons. But that would be fatal for sure, seizing upon theologia gloriae to guarantee theologia crucis—a patent oxymoron. In Saxony too, even Luther’s own “reformed” Saxony, theology of the cross was “remnant” theology.

SUMMA: Viewed through Lutheran lenses, the “move to the global south” may signal failure of faith in the global north. It may well be that the Platzregen has moved. Better said, that God has moved the Platzregen. However, before that can be verified, a “visitation” must be made—in the visual root meaning of the term “visit,” a “looking into” what gospel(s) is(are) raining in the south. Numbers don’t verify anything in such visitations. It takes quality control. And not all will agree

what yardstick should be used to quality-check the specimens. Luther proposed the glory/cross test for the Gospel. One of his colleagues, Melanchthon, reworded that test into a more pragmatic double question: Are the merits and benefits of Christ actually being “used” and offered to the people, or are they being wasted? Are the people actually receiving the grace and comfort that God-in-Christ wants them to have, or are they worse off than they were before? We will attempt to use this test on southern samples of Gospel below.

[To be continued in next week’s ThTh 408.]

Major American Jewish Theologian Calls for “Left-Hand-of-God” Theology

Colleagues,

One of you ThTh receivers sent me this review of “The Left Hand of God,” a book by Michael Lerner. No surprise, such a title caught my attention. Also no surprise, Lerner’s left-hand, right-hand, distinction is not congruent with stuff you have read in past ThTh posts, that have commended Luther’s view of the ambidextrous deity. But he’s at least “talking the talk,” and he draws on the Hebrew scriptures for clues about “walking the walk.” I pass on to you the review (from the Los Angeles Times—by Episcopal rector Ed Bacon) that came my way. Tacked on after the review are some additional thoughts about “walking the walk” on what seems to me an even more Biblical path than the author himself proposes. Once

again, no surprise, it's hermeneutics, the lenses you use for reading the Bible and for reading the world. Lerner (and the reviewer too?) are using one set; I think I'm using another.

Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

The Left Hand of God: Taking Back Our Country From the Religious Right

By Michael Lerner Harper. San Francisco. 408 pp., \$24.95

Reviewed by Ed Bacon, rector of All Saints Episcopal Church in Pasadena CA.

February 19, 2006

RABBI Michael Lerner's "The Left Hand of God: Taking Back Our Country From the Religious Right" is his latest contribution to a long list of inspiring and practical writings. Here, Lerner contends that "the America we love" is threatened with destruction. His critique stems from the moral values, spiritual practices and political actions of the ancient speak-truth-to-power prophetic tradition.

Lerner's career of balancing social and political action with religious practice began in the Jewish Theological Seminary, where his professor Abraham Joshua Heschel held that the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., in his preaching and his politics, was in effect the 20th century incarnation of the Hebrew prophets. In this book, Lerner – rabbi of San Francisco's progressive Beyt Tikkun synagogue and editor of Tikkun, a journal striving

to “mend, repair, and transform the world” – updates this tradition for the beginning of the 21st century.

Lerner believes America is in the grip of a spiritual crisis.

On the one hand, there is what scholar Walter Brueggemann calls “the imperial consciousness.” This right-wing mind-set worships its own power – an act of idolatry, according to Lerner. Its adherents ignore the groans of the poor, the oppressed and the marginalized, conducting business as usual as though no one were hurting and there were no groans.

On the other, an impotent liberal cohort lacks the moral courage and political savvy to resist a culture of imperial domination in both church and state. The compromises made by the left because of political expediency result in a political lassitude, which amounts to complicity with the forces of empire.

But Lerner is chiefly concerned with the millions of people who are not conservative ideologues but who have in recent elections voted that way because they yearn for the “purpose-driven life of meaning” promised by the communities of the religious right. There they find a sense of belonging, of dignity, of outrage at meaningless marketplace thinking and (in Lerner’s indictment of his own liberal tribe) a respectful absence of condescension. The irony that begs for explanation is the phenomenon of this group voting against its own enlightened self-interest.

Lerner’s reflections are informed by his interviews with “middle-income working people,” conducted over 28 years for the Institute for Labor and Mental Health, which he co-founded in 1977. “The psychotherapists, union activists, and social theorists who were working at the institute,” he writes, “had one question we particularly wanted to answer: why is it that

people whose economic interests would lead them to identify with the Left often actually end up voting for the Right?" What he and his colleagues discovered was "that many people need what anthropologist Clifford Geertz once termed a 'politics of meaning' and what I now call a spiritual politics a spiritual framework that can lend meaning to their lives [and] allow them to serve something beyond personal goals and economic self-interest. If they don't find this sense of purpose on the Left, they will look for it on the Right." With consistent passion, Lerner insists on respect for this group of people. The left sabotages its efforts every time it views them as somehow less intelligent and evolved than, say, the liberal elite.

For Lerner, the key is something he calls "meaning needs." The left has to recognize "that people hunger for a world that has meaning and love; for a sense of aliveness, energy, and authenticity; for a life embedded in a community in which they are valued for who they most deeply are, with all their warts and limitations, and feel genuinely seen and recognized; for a sense of contributing to the good; and for a life that is about something more than just money and accumulating material goods." The right, he maintains, has supplied all this in a variety of ways. The left is clueless, unaware that such needs even exist.

At the core of Lerner's argument is his description of two competing theologies.

The theology of the "right hand of God" gives conservative ideologues their religious credibility. This theology "sees the universe as a fundamentally scary place filled with evil forces. God is the avenger, the big man in heaven who can be invoked to use violence to overcome those evil forces, either right now or in some future ultimate reckoning. [T]he world is filled with constant dangers and the rational way to live is to

dominate and control others before they dominate and control us.”

The “left hand of God” theology sees God as “the loving, kind, and generous energy in the universe” and “encourages us to be like this loving God.”

Lerner readily admits that the right-hand theology exists in the scriptures of the world’s major religions, but he objects to its use by the religious right to promote a kind of imperial dominion, a la Pat Robertson’s 1986 stated goal “to rule the world for God.” The scriptural passages often used to justify a dominionist position in both Judaism and Christianity, Lerner points out were originally written to empower the oppressed with assurances that God would hear their cries and come in power to liberate them and establish a reign of justice and peace. Thus, he argues, the hard-core religious right has perverted religion: They distort scriptural texts and ancient theologies written for the powerless and use them to theologically undergird the powerful. Lerner sees this core as a relatively small part of American society. The much larger populace that votes with the religious right does so in support of what it sees as “a community that gives priority to spiritual aliveness and is affirming and loving. That is the experience they are looking for, and for that they are willing to hear God’s voice in the way the Religious Right hears it.”

Lerner’s solution is to call for the redemption of religion in the thinking of the secular left, along with the establishment of a politics that refuses to allow the values of the commonwealth to be trumped by the powers protecting private wealth. He advocates the development of a “spiritual left” as a coherent alternative to religious triumphalism. Were we to adopt this “spiritual-political alternative” and bring together three groups he has identified on the left the secular, the

“spiritual but not religious” and the “progressive religious” then America could be rescued.

Like Rabbi Lerner, I am a clergyman in a faith community rooted in the prophetic tradition. I share his concerns about the health of the United States and of the world, as measured by our care for one another in a context of peace. I share his hope that there is abundant spiritual energy available to individuals for effective social action over the long haul. That energy is accessed when people are meaningfully rooted in communities where their dignity (along with that of every other human being) finds warm affirmation and where prayer leading to vigorous social action is the norm. These communities can, as Lerner insists, be empowering oases of hope in the midst of the politics of fear in which we now live.

Rabbi Heschel taught that in every moment something sacred is at stake. His student, Rabbi Lerner, has written a book that sends a clear call to everyone who cares about the future of America to take part in the transformation of our history into something of beauty, meaning and justice a work that, whether we think of it that way or not, is intrinsically sacred.

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Some second thoughts

1. Michael Lerner [I would normally say, “hereafter ML.” But those initials I’ve used so often for someone else.] uses left-hand/right-hand as labels for political parties, and not as labels for God’s two distinctively different operations in human history. Lerner’s rabbinic monotheism (like all monotheisms—Islam included—with no trinitarianism available) can’t make sense of an

ambidextrous deity. For him God's left-hand and right-hand label human politics—the left one being right (=correct) and the right one being wrong. For Luther God's two hands label God's own politics. Despite their contrasting, sometimes conflicting, character both of them are "right" because God says so. Below I cite some lines from the review and then add some lines of my own.

2. "The America we love" is threatened with destruction. Yes. It is the politics of God's left hand that America confronts. Might even be that the "politics of the right" which so vex Lerner are part of God's own get-your-comeuppance program. Remember back in Exodus 14 when the Egyptian war-machine was stopped dead in its tracks at (better "in") the Reed Sea. I've always thought that they were simply inundated and drowned when Moses stretched out his hand.' Not quite. The reason they couldn't escape the return tsunami was that "the LORD looked down upon the host of the Egyptians and discomfited [what a term!] the host of the Egyptians, clogging their chariot wheels [Hebrew actually says: God took the wheels off] so that they came to a standstill." Where are the wheels of America NOT falling off—not only with our war-machine, but throughout the land?
3. The ancient speak-truth-to-power prophetic tradition. America is in the grip of a spiritual crisis. "The imperial consciousness." an act of idolatry. Biblically viewed "spiritual crises" always take place on coram deo, the divine-human interface. If for no other reason than that the "crisis" signals more than that the wheels are falling off, but that the critic behind the crisis [same root-word in Greek] is God. Thus the "truth" spoken by the prophets was less addressed to "power" (i.e., the coram hominibus realities of the day) but to the idolatry of self-worship. For this the Baal-business was a prop.

That's all coram deo stuff. In the USA the shibboleth is "In God we trust." Our imperial consciousness proclaims: "It is ourselves that we worship."

4. Compromises made by the left . . . amount to complicity with the forces of empire. The left sabotages its efforts. There are no clear signals that the left is any less hooked on the idolatry of self-worship than the right is.
5. They yearn for the "purpose-driven life of meaning" . . . "meaning needs." People need. . . a 'politics of meaning' and what I now call a spiritual politics.

You have to "hang your heart" on something. So Luther in explaining the first commandment. And it is a "have to." Even atheists are heart-hangers. Meaning is a relatively modern word for what hearts hang on. In the Bible it's called God. And the crucial question is—true God or false God. So in today's parlance, "true" meaning or "false" meaning.

Lerner sees the political right in America attending to this need (with false meaning, of course) and the left ignoring or even pooh-poohing it. I.e., offering nothing at all to the universal "meaning need." In his own words: The right has supplied all this in a variety of ways. The left is clueless, unaware that such needs even exist.

6. At the core of Lerner's argument . . . two competing theologies. The theology of the "right hand of God" . . . "sees the universe as a fundamentally scary place filled with evil forces". God is the avenger, the big man in heaven who can be invoked to use violence to overcome those evil forces, either right now or in some future ultimate reckoning...[T]he world is filled with constant dangers and the rational way to live is to dominate and control others before they dominate and control us."Luther

got his left-hand / right-hand notion about God from the Hebrew scriptures. I wonder if Lerner, who is eminently learned, knows that. But though what he depicts here is the theology of the political right, it is biblically God's left-hand at work. Distorted, of course in the sentences above by the perverse notion that humans can "invoke," actually, manipulate, that deity to fulfill our agendas. That is the primal reversal of making God our servant, the epitome of idolatry.

7. The "left hand of God" theology sees God as "the loving, kind, and generous energy in the universe" and "encourages us to be like this loving God." What Lerner portrays here is his wished-for theology of the political left. Biblically—especially in the Hebrew scriptures— it approaches the God-talk of God's right hand. Even here it's a tad wishy-washy about "generous energy in the universe." As though it is inherent in the cosmos and not a quality of the kosmokrator, the lord of the cosmos. In addition you wouldn't expect a Jewish scholar to add Jesus to the mix. But Christians do, and do so with a twist about both hands of god that might perplex Lerner. The two hands of the deity are not up for us to say yes to one and no to the other. Christians claim: "He's got the whole world in his hands"—BOTH of them. We are on the receiving end of both, not choosers at all. First of all of God's left-hand operations—preserving us when we do right and giving us due recompense when we don't. That goes for nations too. When the wheels fall off, God has loosened the bolts. No choosing. It's inflicted. Christians don't actually "choose" God's right hand either, the redemption agenda. Though here, in contrast to God's leftish work, they can say no. Better said, they "flee" to God's right hand. First of all they are surprised that God enacts a "regime-change" at the coram deo interface, a sweet swap

where sinners do NOT get their comeuppance, but meet Messianic mercy. Secondly, that it is offered for free. Thirdly, that it “works” when you trust it.

8. Imperial dominion, A la Pat Robertson’s “to rule the world for God.” A dominionist position...the hard-core religious right has perverted religion: They distort scriptural texts and ancient theologies written for the powerless and use them to theologically undergird the powerful. Years ago, when Transactional Analysis (simplified Freudianism perhaps) was the rage, some bright seminarians we were teaching were taken by it. They asked Bob Bertram just how kosher it was. He wrote a brief essay, now posted on the Crossings website “Works of Bob Bertram” under “Transactional Analysis.” His final paragraph says:
“For the most constructive use of TA by Christians I would propose two alternatives. We should either demythologize TA’s soteriological pretensions and then employ it for a very limited level of secular, interpersonal behavioral change, or we should radicalize it with the anti-Gnostic Secret of the Christian Gospel and then use it for the Kingdom unabashedly and outright. Of these two alternatives, my preference is the second.”

“Demythologize its soteriological pretensions.” That’s what’s needed for both left and right politics these days. With its penchant for God-talk the right makes no bones about its soteriological goal to “save” America. The left is no less soteriological, but eschews God-talk. Lerner wants to correct that fatal flaw. Listen again to the reviewer.

“Lerner’s solution is to call for the redemption of religion in the thinking of the secular left, along with the establishment of a politics that refuses to allow the

values of the commonwealth to be trumped by the powers protecting private wealth. He advocates the development of a 'spiritual left' as a coherent alternative to religious triumphalism. Were we to adopt this 'spiritual-political alternative' and bring together three groups he has identified on the left, the secular, the 'spiritual but not religious' and the 'progressive religious' then America could be rescued."

"Rescuing America." Is that soteriology or not? Depends. To rescue America to its God-given left-hand agenda—not to save the world—would be good rescue indeed. To "de-ghosticize" America from its alleged wisdom about how the world is to be run, and our own Messianic pretensions as the chosen nation to carry out that mission, will take more than education. That's a call for repentance. I'm sure that such a call was in the mix of Bertram's second option above: "to radicalize [Lerner's proposal] with the anti-Gnostic Secret of the Christian Gospel." What all Bob had in mind in that one-liner, I'm not sure. But it is a tease.

9. Like Rabbi Lerner, I am a clergyman in a faith community rooted in the prophetic tradition. . . . I share his hope that there is abundant spiritual energy available. The first word in the prophetic tradition is regularly repent. Especially when prophets speak to power. All the more so when prophets speak to world powers. See Jonah to Nineveh. There is no hope—it's a false hope—in a nation's "abundant spiritual energy" if God is at work "discomfiting" that nation, even detaching the wheels from its war machine. The Israelites were rescued—through divine discomfiture—at the Reed Sea. What would it have taken to rescue the Egyptians?
10. Rabbi Heschel taught [Rabbi Lerner] that in every moment

something sacred is at stake. Every moment in human life is a moment coram deo. To acknowledge that the “sacred is at stake” is to acknowledge that “we ourselves” are at stake [in more ways than one] in such encounters. In coram deo encounters God is at the interface asking: Adam, where are you? The first response to such an interrogator is not “awe,” but “ouch.” And then repentance, and then grabbing for God’s right-hand. That’s where rescue lies when we are at stake (sic!) in those very moments that Heschel and Lerner are talking about. Also rescue for the nation—to save it FROM the lethal consequences of its usurping God’s right-hand work, its soteriological pretensions, and to save it FOR its calling as God’s left-hand hitter in these United States. Lerner’s title is a grabber. But it needs some work. The Biblically-specified politics of God’s own left hand is what neither the political left (who shy away from God-talk) nor the right, (who do it all the time) are doing in America today. But they could be closer to the mark—and so would Lerner—if they got wind of God’s own politics of left and right.

The Gift of Grace: The Future of Lutheran Theology

The Gift of Grace: The Future of Lutheran Theology
by Niels Henrik Gregersen (Editor), Bo Holm (Editor), Ted Peters (Editor)

Paperback: 368 pages

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Review by Frederick Niedner, Valparaiso University

Thursday Theology's regular readers will recall that in January of 2003 the Lutheran World Federation, Dialogue journal, and the University of Aarhus in Denmark convened approximately 125 Lutheran theologians from around the world to discuss presentations on "The Future of Lutheran Theology." The group included a handful of Crossings Community members and friends, including Ed and Marie Schroeder and Robin Morgan. In Thursday Theology #241 (23 January 2003), my late colleague David Truemper and I, who also attended, reported on the major themes and points of engagement developed at that conference and we also offered a few initial items of critique.

Two volumes containing papers presented at that conference have now appeared, the first late in 2003, entitled *The Role of Mission in the Future of Lutheran Theology* (ISBN 87-989002-3-4), edited by Viggo Mortensen (no, not the actor who played Aragorn in the Lord of the Rings films, but an Aarhus theologian and conference organizer of the same name). Ed Schroeder's presentation ("Some Thoughts on Mission Drawn from Luther and the Lutheran Confessions") appeared in that collection, as did Richard Bliese's ("Lutheran Missiology: Struggling to Move from Reactive Reform to Innovative Initiative") and my own ("Lutheran Theology of Election and Predestination as a Model for Witness and Mission in a Pluralistic World").

A year later a much larger collection was released, *The Gift of Grace: The Future of Lutheran Theology*. It provides a more

comprehensive picture of the Aarhus conference's work and potential significance. The book opens with Niels Henrik Gregersen's conference keynote address, "Ten Theses on the Future of Lutheran Theology," and then groups the volume's nearly 30 subsequent essays under seven themes: Grace, Cross, Justification, Justice, Comparisons, Ecumenics, and World.

This review essay will not attempt to summarize or account for the arguments of each item among so many different essays. Instead, it will focus on several thematic features of the conference its papers, and it will discuss in some detail only a single essay in the collection, "The Lutheran Confessional Writings and the Future of Lutheran Theology," by David Truemper. [I proceed in this way with some trepidation, since I still bear scars that came from using such a tactic on a difficult-to-summarize work back in days of my youth. In my second year of college at one of the Missouri Synod's "system schools," a religion professor required that we write a review of some important work of theology in the history of the LC-MS. He assigned the books, and I drew J. T. Mueller's *Christian Dogmatics*. Even as a 19-year-old, I knew I had no critical perspective on the whole of Christianity's doctrinal tradition, nor Missouri's peculiar take on it, and I couldn't bear the thought of summarizing every doctrine from creation to consummation. I resolved, cleverly I thought, to summarize and respond to one part of the whole. The paper received a "D" and I endured a tongue-lashing, the gist of which was an accusation of sloth. Thus, from this point on in the present review, I shall presume to *pecca fortiter*, so to speak.]

Grace

Many of my personal responses to this collection the Aarhus papers have already been articulated in the Thursday Theology piece (referred to above) that reported on the conference

itself. Among them remains the somewhat troublesome choice of grace as the central charism that Lutheran theology supposedly has as its contribution to the larger, Christian conversation in the world today. That assertion permeated pre-conference and conference materials, and it now appears as the title of the collected essays. In a recent *Christian Century* review of this volume (February 21, 2006, pp. 61-63) Wayne A. Holst makes a point that Ed Schroeder and David Truemper attempted to make both during and immediately after the Aarhus conference, that it wasn't grace, but rather justification by faith that drove a wedge between the 16th-century reformers and the Pope's theologians. Everybody in the dispute emphasized, relied on, and swore by grace. They couldn't agree, however, on the role and nature of faith as that which justifies the sinner before God.

In truth, as every seminarian learns, combatants on all sides talked the language of both grace and faith, but various parties of the 16th century meant different things when using either term, and the same holds true today. It's no wonder, by the way, that these categories confound generation after generation of preachers and theologians. For one thing, the whole notion of salvation by grace through faith behaves like a piece of alien tissue transplanted into our hearts and minds. Our immune systems attack it continually. Only through daily doses of anti-immune-system medications, otherwise known as preaching, the sacraments, and repentance, can we clearly remember or see how these things happen to us and function within us. For another thing, all our language about grace and faith is of necessity glued together by prepositions, and prepositions are the most difficult and tricky elements of every language. Indeed, they often function as Judas goats. They betray us, but we need them, and at critical points we actually need them precisely to betray us by leading us into places where we find that our language has failed, and that we have failed, and our only hope is to

remember that in the end the gospel is the assurance that though we cannot cling to God, or use our language to make God graspable, God clings to us and will not abandon us even in the day of our crucifixion upon our own prepositions.

For Robert Jensen ("Triune Grace"), grace is the Triune God giving himself to us. Faith receives that giving in the same way a bride or groom receives the gift that is the other. Understanding grace only through the church's Trinitarian understanding of God keeps Lutheran theology in service to the larger household of faith. Heidelberg theologian Christoph Schwöbel, in his response to Jensen, generally concurs. However, Monica Melanchthon of the Lutheran church in India ("The Grace of God and the Equality of Human Persons") understands grace as the universal inheritance of every human being into whom the Spirit of God breathes life. This leads her ultimately to define sin as the refusal of some to see the Spirit alive in others who are different, as for example the upper-caste Indians of her homeland do toward those of lower castes.

> From such a redefinition of grace it becomes a short step to understanding the primary work of all who believe in grace as the lifting up of those kept low through the refusal to recognize the grace of the in-dwelling Spirit who lives within all people. Without belaboring the point, such concerns came to dominate much of the conference discussion as it had dominated many of the pre-conference papers. Liberation theologies of various sorts have found great favor in Lutheran World Federation circles in recent years, and that remains evident in this volume's papers. The tacit assumption of numerous essays, including Melanchthon's, could be stated as, "Our politics is better than your politics, and the sooner our kind takes over the better." Needless to say, fitting such a notion into theological containers most of us would recognize as Lutheran takes some powerful magic.

Future of Lutheran Theology

The subtitle of this volume, as for the Aarhus conference, is "The Future of Lutheran Theology." At least two questions lurk within that phrase. Does Lutheran theology have a future? And if so, what future(s) might it have? Several essays in this collection and much of the conversation at Aarhus focused on the historical fact that Lutheran theology grew up as a response and reaction to things already underway. It is not by nature innovative. Rather, it sought first to correct the perceived mis-direction of the medieval church that, as Philip Melanchthon implies in such key writings as Article IV of the Apology, failed to honor Christ's death and no longer offered comfort to penitent hearts. Instead, the church threw human beings back on their own devices as they sought to understand their place with God, and in doing so they robbed the penitent of the gospel's intended consolation.

Ultimately, radical reformers did the same thing as they responded to Rome with their own kinds of legalism and pietism. Lutherans also reacted to the tendency to fall into the ditch on that side of the road, too.

Is there a future for a movement that grew up and remains by nature reactive? Or has its moment passed with the changes that have come upon both the Catholic and Evangelical churches that now inhabit the ecclesial scene in which Lutheranism lives as a cousin in today's household of faith?

Robert Jensen offers the most traditional answer when he asserts that Lutheran theology has a meaningful future only if it remains Trinitarian and ecumenical in its outlook. It does not deserve to live if it seeks isolation. Though he doesn't say it in so many words, he seems to work with an understanding close to the old cliché that success is working oneself out of a job.

If Lutheranism really succeeded, it could, and perhaps should, disappear.

Though sometimes his keynote address and essay go off in maverick directions, as when he casually attributes to Luther a theology of double predestination, Niels Gregersen indirectly answers the question about possible futures for Lutheran theology in one very helpful way. I must quibble with the order in which he argues his points, however. Gregersen's fourth thesis states that "the 'core' of Luther's theology should not be sought in specific systems of 'Lutheran Theology' nor in the doctrine of justification taken in isolation. Luther's great discovery that the word of forgiveness is unconditional on the part of God and unconditioned by specific human activities took place in the context of first-order Christian practices that precede doctrinal formulation." What follows from that, to my way of thinking, appears in the previous thesis: "Important for the future of Lutheran theology is Luther's practical theology. The liturgical, pastoral, and catechetical dimensions of Luther's theology contain untapped resources for theological reflection." That thesis goes on to talk about important work of the church that isn't prescribed by God, but the part quoted here calls attention to something crucial in the Lutheran understanding of church.

The church is not, first of all, an organization with a theology and a collection of assertions and covenants such that it can have a future guaranteed by the beauty or truth of that theology. Rather, it is the collection of those who hear the gospel and get drawn into that gospel through the actions of the sacraments. Theology has a future only insofar as the church gathered by the Spirit's continual proclamation of the gospel said and done remains and endures. Moreover, theology serves that activity, not the other way around.

It follows, then, that the only way Lutheranism becomes something other than reaction and correction is through proclamation, through its gospeling the world in a way that honors Christ's death and comforts penitent hearts. It has no unique political agenda, nor does it guarantee that it can imbue its adherents with insights that will give them better, cleaner, or more pure political instincts than, say, Jews or Muslims.

That brief but critical insight takes me to a brief word about my late colleague's essay in this collection. David Truemper sought to describe a way that the Lutheran Confessional Writings could have a healthy and meaningful role in whatever future there may be for Lutheran Theology. After describing various historic and contemporary ways of using, or ignoring, the Lutheran Confessions, from simplistic "proof-text" methods akin to uncritical, a-historical, fundamentalist uses of scripture to the more helpful "witness" and "map" hermeneutics of Vilmos Vajta and Carl Braaten respectively, Truemper describes a hermeneutic of analogy in which the confessions function for the church in a way similar to the canon of scripture, as analog and resource, not as barbed-wire fence.

Crossings folk will recognize the description of the Bible as a collection of "problem-solving documents," a phrase Truemper borrows from Robert Bertram and applies to the Confessions. It's like a vast medicine cabinet with all kinds of remedies for getting things straight as we seek to share and believe in the promises of God. But the Galatians' problems weren't the same as those in Thessalonika or Ephesus, so we talk differently when we write to them. And now, after reading others' mail for many centuries, we've learned how to see when we're in the Galatian mess and how it's different from the Corinthian slough. Likewise, says Truemper, the confessional writings teach us how to diagnose certain kinds of problems, and they offer ways for seeing and receiving a prognosis in the face of such diagnoses.

In a final portion of his essay, Truemper offers “A Sample from the Feed-Box: Grounding the Church and Its Unity Eschatologically.” In this brief section Truemper summarized some insights he had sought to articulate in what turned out to be the last months of his life, and the remarkable feature of those paragraphs, especially in the context of all the other learned essays in this volume, is that David Truemper was preaching in these paragraphs. The rhetoric is not that of discourse we all use in conferences and meetings of learned societies. Rather, it is the language and phrasing of proclamation. To wit:

“One more example. The gospel of our Baptism speaks to each of us God’s final verdict upon us: ‘You are forgiven; you are mine; I love you for Christ’s sake and will never let you go!’ Now, consider what that means for our dealing with one another. If God’s ultimate verdict on you is that you are forgiven, righteous, God’s own child, then it is already too late for me to treat you as if that were not in fact God’s own last word about you and to you. If I hold a grudge against you, or if I refuse to forgive you, why, look whose ‘last word’ I am thereby opposing, whose ‘final verdict’ I would thereby disallow! God’s end-time word about you and to you is forgiveness; how can I oppose that and nevertheless claim God’s love myself? No, by the eschatolo-logic of forgiveness, it is too late to treat you as unforgiven, too late to nurse a grudge, too late to pretend that I could rule you out of the kingdom! The eschato-logic of baptismal forgiveness is true, already here, already now. That is why ‘it is not necessary’ for human creations-formulae, contracts, declarations-to be made universal. It is too late for that. Christ’s church is Christ’s church, already here. Christ’s church is Christ’s one church, already now. It is too late to act otherwise, and it is most dangerous to put one’s own standing before God in jeopardy by opposing God’s end-time

verdict. Enough, already, is enough."

Theology is not the last word. The future of Lutheran theology rests solely in whatever future the preached, acted-out, eschato-logic Word of God creates as the Spirit calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the church, overcoming perpetually and forever the simple fact that we cannot by our own reason or strength believe any of God's promises. To the extent that our theology serves such proclamation, it has an innovative, not merely reactive future. And it cannot fail. It is already too late for that.

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The History of Medical Missions

Colleagues,

This week's post is an ellipse—one storyline orbiting two centers. First center in the ellipse is John Eckrich's review of Christoffer Grundmann's pioneering historical study of Medical Missions; second center is John's own pitch for medical missions today. Both author and reviewer themselves constitute a second sort of ellipse on the personal level as well. Author Grundmann is the current occupant of the "John R. Eckrich Chair, University Professor in Religion and the Healing Arts" at Valparaiso University. Reviewer John D.

Eckrich M.D. is the son of the man for whom the V.U. chair is named. For more biographical data on both John and Christoffer see the final paragraphs of this post. Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

***Book Review and Commentary—
Christoffer H. Grundmann. Sent to Heal: Emergence
and Development of Medical Missions.
University Press of America: Lanham, Maryland.
xvi, 375 pp. Paper. US\$40.***

Reviewed by John D. Eckrich, M.D., Internist and Gastroenterologist, St. Louis, and Executive Director of Grace Place Lutheran Retreat Ministries.

Dr. Christoffer Grundmann, in this remarkably detailed and utterly enlightening perspective on medical missions, closes his thesis thusly, “All (God’s people who hear the call of Christ into healing ministry from the Gospel in Matthew 4:23 and commissioned to us in John 14:12-15) are asked to give a credible account of the corporeality of salvation in their respective witness, a witness which will be credible not in what it claims but in what it actually brings about tangibly. And this should be nothing but life, life in abundance.”

This beautiful paraphrase catches the essence of John 10:10, and I believe sounds the leading trumpet voluntary from the orchestral history of medical mission work as provided for us in Grundmann’s wonderful text to lead us to mission service in the 21st Century. Abundant life is “whole life,” integrated

living, balancing body, mind, spirit, relationships and emotion into vocation and leisure. This Gospel mantra, defined by Christ himself in Mark 12 for the scribes and teachers of the law, describes for us the characteristics necessary to do medical missions in the future.

Medical missionaries need to understand themselves as “whole” people and approach their task wholistically. They must see the dis-order and dis-ease in the people they serve wholly. Missionaries must deal with an interactive matrix of health and disease”physical, spiritual, emotional, relational and intellectual” all experienced in a milieu of terrorism, biodegradation, and the very real challenges of Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, atheism and whatever “isms” the future holds for us. What formidable challenges! How could anyone vaguely hope to “heal” in this quagmire? Thank God, as Dr.Grundmann exemplifies for us from history, we do not enter this trying ground on our own. Our ancestral missionaries model for us the “healing” power embodied in our work because, and only because, the glorified body and spirit of our Savior resides within us from our baptism. His whole being makes us whole. We cannot help but succeed!

Why is an historical review of medical missions so important now, and not just a major intellectual exercise? As Grundmann reminds us, history provides us the distance and overview of our actions to allow us to be truly critical of our motives, direction and outcome assessments.

Particularly poignant are the enlightening questions Grundmann asks of 19th Century missionaries, and which he reminds us are the questions we need to ask of ourselves today:

- What is the “proper task” of medical missionaries?
- How does “saving souls” relate to healing diseases and

ordering society toward better function?

- *With scarce money, should it be spent to train and support primarily medical personnel?*
- *Does the explosion of science and technology redefine “life,” “salvation,” “healing,” and “abundant living”?*
- *Does modern medicine compel us to send people resources into dangerous and often unwelcome settings?*
- *Can we really “enjoy” modern culture and medical knowledge without feeling obliged to extend these to “have nots”?*

Sent To Heal beautifully explores the multiple layers and parameters of these questions with focus on the foundations of medical mission work in the 1800's led by middle European and British advocates, mission societies of Europe and North America, gender-specific missionary pioneers, geographic mission stations in Asia, Africa and eastward, and types of mission venues, particularly hospital and medical clinics, dispensaries and public health initiatives. With anticipation, we look forward to Dr. Grundmann's promise of a second volume detailing 20th Century medical mission work with its new challenges and opportunities. This is most necessary!

Dr. Grundmann sets the table for what I find are the major themes facing us in the third millennium. Epidemiology, public health and hygiene, preventative health, the economics of health care distribution and preservation of ecological resources for health are leading issues for anyone joining the future medical mission debate. Practitioners must be trained and must think and treat wholistically. They must be versed not only in their medical expertise, but anchored in their spiritual relationship to Christ, with good management, teaching and people skills. They should be compassionate (theology of the Cross) and continue to bear the hurts of those they serve as their medical missionary ancestors have modeled

for them.

Finally, from my own perspective and grown out of history and contemporary trends, I believe great awareness should be given the concept of faith-community based nursing, what we used to call “parish nursing.” This model, forwarded by Granger Westberg and others, holds real promise not only for North American peoples, but for all regions of the world. As we have learned that the “great American doctor” and the “European or American” hospital/clinic model imposed into foreign cultures may not be so acceptable an entry point to Gospel ministry today, the simple care, education, health/hygiene-delivery model offered by faith-based nurses appears to have effective acceptance in many more societies.

Dr. Grundmann’s book is an essential read for all who hear and accept the call to health and healing ministry. The bibliography alone is worth the price of admission. But more importantly, this text and references demonstrate for us how this fascinating and complex cadre of disciplines and medical and theological topics place medical mission work on firm scientific, sociologic, theological, and humanitarian footing. This is God-work.

John D. Eckrich, M.D.

Addendum: John R. Eckrich, who glorified Christ in this Valparaiso chair, led a dedicated Christian life centered in the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod. He loved the Church and the Church treated him with goodness. His beginnings were humble and austere in 1920’s America – broken family, poverty of the depression, night school degree in engineering from Washington University, St. Louis, business and civic leadership, and finally CEO of The Lutheran Medical Center of St. Louis.

When the health care and urban environment around Lutheran

Medical Center was spiraling into a formidable future, he was able to transition this great health resource into a charitable foundation, now actually divided into two phenomenal organizations: the Lutheran Foundation of St. Louis having awarded multi-millions of dollars toward myriad health initiatives in St. Louis and the world; and, Lutheran Senior Services' managers of a multitude of senior living and health care facilities throughout the central U.S. His four children and their spouses all work in the health industry and serve their home Lutheran congregations with vigor. Jack Eckrich rests this day with a Crown of Glory in the arms of his healing Savior to eternity.

John D. Eckrich, M.D. (John R. Eckrich's son) is a Lutheran physician, Internist and Gastroenterologist for the past 30 years in St. Louis. From his experiences as physician to many Lutheran seminarians at Concordia Seminary in St. Louis, and private physician to many pastors, teachers and LC-MS personnel, he founded Grace Place Lutheran Retreats. Grace Place offers weeklong retreats to Lutheran professional church workers, teaching them preventative health and wellness skills to integrate physical, emotional, spiritual, intellectual and relational health into their professional ministry and personal pilgrim walk. In five years, Grace Place has retreated over 650 clergy couples and 150 seminary students, "inoculating" them against unhealthy practices. Dr. Eckrich was a medical missionary to Slovakia in the 1990's and currently serves as the medical director and advisor to Dar Al Kalima Health and Wellness Center in Bethlehem, Palestine.

Christoffer Grundmann has theology degrees from several institutions in his native country Germany, beginning with the Hermannsburg Mission Academy and concluding with the standard "double doctorate" for German university professors with two book-length dissertations. One of them is the book reviewed

here. The second book (still only available in German) deals with the phenomenon of healing in the so-called "AIC," African Instituted Churches, in southern Africa. Christoffer was a Lutheran missionary in South India from 1978-83. During that time he facilitated the first-ever translation and publication of Luther's Works in the Tamil language. On return to Germany he joined the staff of the Institute of Medical Missions at Tuebingen as theological consultant and hospital chaplain. After several academic appointments in Germany, he joined the Valparaiso (Indiana) University theology faculty in 2001. He is a sought-after expert in matters of medical missions, faith and healing, healing and the spirit worlds, and is often elsewhere on the planet for consultations and guest lectures in these fields.

A Book Review on Confession and Absolution – Lutheran Style

Colleagues,

This week's posting offers readers Wayne Holst's review of Ronald K. Rittgers' case study on Confession and Absolution in Lutheran theology and church life in the earliest days of the Reformation. The identities of author and reviewer are in the text that follows. Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

THE REFORMATION OF THE KEYS: Confession, Conscience, and Authority in Sixteenth Century Germany,
by Ronald K. Rittgers. 2004.
Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA. 318
pages. Hardcover. \$49.95US. ISBN #0-674-01176-7.

Reviewed by: Wayne A. Holst

Why would anyone want to invest time and energy in a book on private confession as practiced in sixteenth century Germany when many Protestants – from day one – rejected it, and when many Roman Catholics themselves have abandoned it as a religious obligation?

The answer is because some developments in early Reformation Germany continue to have contemporary implications – spiritually and theologically. English-speaking people have been quite unaware of this story, but it is to their current benefit to be introduced to it.

The Reformation of the Keys by Ronald K. Rittgers, Associate Professor of the History of Christianity at Yale Divinity School, is much more than an esoteric sojourn into Reformation history.

The author suggests four goals guiding his presentation. To examine the issue of private confession, which has received little attention from English-speaking scholars; to show how the reformation of private confession was part of a reformation of (the power of) the keys that had important implications for politics and piety in the German reformation – so that the book is really about the keys and not just confession; to suggest

how the reformation of the keys provides new light on the way reformers and lay rulers used authority – not simply to discipline and control, but also to protect and console the human conscience; and to attempt a kind of history that takes theology and historical context seriously. Context is important for the author. That is why his study is not only about ideas related to confession and the keys. It is also about how these ideas became incarnated into the life of an important German city profoundly influenced by the Lutheran reformation.

These worthy goals notwithstanding, this reviewer interprets the work as a nuanced, academic study of how Lutherans, almost from the beginning, attempted to formulate a reformed position standing between traditional Catholics and more reactionary Protestants during tumultuous times. Rittgers, indirectly if not directly, shows how Lutheran theology sought to bridge Catholic and Protestant understandings of important but conflicting theological and spiritual issues. That stance, while perhaps more radicalized in earlier times and on some issues, has not substantively changed in half a millennium.

2.

The book demonstrates that Lutheranism began as a conservative reform movement within the catholic tradition. Lutheranism affirmed and retained what it considered evangelically sound from Catholicism. Lutherans did not, for example, totally reject the medieval system of private confession and penance administered through a priest (the classic sacerdotal system and the doctrine of the power of the keys which was based on Mt. 16:13-20).

Instead, Lutherans retained and yet substantially modified what they inherited; replacing it with a system of pastoral and general soul-care negotiated in co-operation with lay civic

authorities. Here is a case study of how lay political leaders in the German city of Nurnberg (known also today as Nuremberg) gradually divested power and influence from the traditional clergy-controlled structures that had defined their lives. Civic authorities replaced the old with a new system both Protestant and lay-dominated. In so doing, Rittgers reveals an early example of what we today might call secularization (or to put it another way, give evidence of the sacralization of temporal authority).

This is an extensive assessment of archival and printed documents. It is not a comparative study of various theological understandings of confession or a reflection on the sacred intimacies of the confessional. Those who would disagree with Rittgers on this or that theological/spiritual point should remember that the author is a church historian, not a systematician or spiritual director. The written word – especially from civic archives – while enlightening, is not always sufficiently nuanced to convey meanings that are satisfying to religious or spiritual readers. City archives would not be expected to serve as the best preserve of theology or spiritual guidance.

This is also not a primer on the development of the Lutheran theology of confession. Rather, it is a chronology of what actually happened to Lutheran theology and practice in a city whose senate was among the original signatories to the Augsburg Confession of 1530 (Augsburg was a foundational defence of the Lutheran Reformation) and Nurnberg was the first imperial city to adopt the Lutheran reformation.

The author attempts to demonstrate how confession (in this case, the acknowledgement of sin made privately and heard by a priest) was disengaged from penance (satisfaction required from the penitant for wrongs committed). In truth, the city

magistrate sought to reject the latter, in accord with the teaching of the reformers.

Luther supported private confession from the beginning but objected to the way it had been practiced due to human manipulation. At the outset he favoured a renewed, voluntary private confession. In time, however, Lutherans grew worried about wholesale rejection of the practice because of the resulting popular reaction to things Catholic.

3.

In time, Luther wrote guidelines for renewed private confession in, for example, his small catechism of 1529. So Luther supported private confession from the beginning. His new emphasis was on linking the examination of faith with voluntary confession of sin. This he sought to make mandatory for participation in the Lord's supper.

For centuries, the Catholic church had combined confession and penance in order to maintain what was experienced by the reformers as spiritual control over the laity and to reinforce what they saw as works righteousness.

Rittgers demonstrates how Lutherans wanted their authority to be different. Both lay and clerical leaders sought to protect and console as well as to discipline and control. Rittgers argues that Lutheran private confession attempted to balance spiritual freedom with moral discipline. Luther's teaching of justification by grace through faith granted individuals a certainty of conscience and a greater sense of individual freedom.

Translated into the civil practice of the day, modified versions of private confession were developed and these eventually became part of normal evangelical piety. Compromises ensued in

the wake of debates involving various interest groups – often in an atmosphere of Sturm und Drang.

While the Catholics had used the doctrine of the keys to define and defend their authority, as well as to console the faithful, the reformers promoted a fundamental transformation that would rid the church of what they considered to be clerical abuses. Under the Catholic regime, the faithful often languished in suspension between the hope of forgiveness and the fear of damnation. This ambivalence kept them unsure if they were truly pardoned from admitted sins. Luther wanted them to be assured of forgiveness after an authentic confession that reflected acceptance, through faith, of the pure grace of God.

Rittgers shows how the central dilemma confronting leaders of the German reformation was how to enforce moral social discipline without damaging individual spiritual freedom.

Rejecting penance, Lutherans were compelled to develop private and general confessional forms that relied on civil enforcement that balanced discipline and freedom. Discipline for them was administered by city councilors and not church authorities. Ironically, while the laity experienced relatively more spiritual freedom through these sacramental reforms than through the old Catholic sacrament of penance, civic authority often proved more discouraging than church law. Humane city council-regulated confession became the exception rather than the rule. The result, for the faithful, was a mixed bag of spiritual liberation and new forms of imposed social restraint and enforced conformity.

4.

Rittgers gives a detailed summary of the disputes and controversies surrounding the introduction and implementation of evangelical confessional forms in the city through the

mid-1500s. (The Peace of Augsburg 1555 was formalized between Catholics and Lutherans, but it did not include the Calvinists). In the process, Nurnberg civic council sought to prevent their Lutheran clergy from lording it over lay consciences even as it wanted its pastors to promote religious and moral conformity.

The Nurnberg fathers were laudably concerned about the city's moral condition and oversaw both public and private confession to assure personal and social discipline. These difficult realities were no doubt compromises the Lutheran reformers were loathe to accept because it went against many of the Christian freedoms they had fought hard to recover.

Rittgers explains how basic Reformation teachings morphed politically from positions of protest into a state religion. He shows how leading clergy like Andreas Osiander attempted to retain both pastoral and political control of the confessional process in attempts to maintain what was in essence an evangelical sacerdotalism. Ultimately, however, the council prevailed.

As stated previously, Luther and his Wittenberg associates came to support private confession but – to many who had to work out agreements with civic authorities – they failed to provide it with a pragmatic theological rationale. Once the new order was in place, however, the focus shifted to the catechetical instruction of the young so that a new generation would have a better understanding of the resulting civil order.

Lutheranism became the state religion in many parts of northern Germany. But the Nurnberg story was unique in terms of scope and notoriety.

The Reformation understanding of the meaning of authority came to a head in Nurnberg and settlements were worked through here.

The author gives a positive accounting of what evangelical catechists taught the young but he is unsure as to whether evangelical disciplines resulted in any major moral improvement. The substitution of faith for sorrow for sin, and the authority of the Word for the ministrations of the priest succeeded in solving some problems but resulted in creating others.

In a nutshell, sacred authority was secularized and secular authority was sacralized. Whereas previously, ultimate authority was the purview of the church, it now rested essentially in the hands of the state. The two kingdoms theology of Luther went through a certain adaptation in Nurnberg. In the end, both magistrates and clergy came to respect the divine turf that lay beyond their purview. Each sought to honor the conscience of the laity and the Word of God as ultimate authorities in matters pertaining to confession.

5.

This reviewer concludes through his reading of this real life Nurnberg case study (it is not an idealistic theological treatise removed from the challenges of daily living) that Lutheranism was, even in its formative years, a conservative reform movement. Nurnberg challenges those who would make of early Lutheranism a much more radical and polemical reformation. The Nurnberg story of a thirty-year period when the Reformation was at its apex, is one during which a relative equilibrium prevailed in spite of conflicting religious and secular entanglements. Leading laity and clergy struggled to retain the essential substance of traditional Catholicism and to integrate this to new evangelical understandings and practices.

With Rittgers, readers might equivocate – or hesitate to conclude – whether the new moral and spiritual state of the

city was any better than the old. But in a true sense such a question is irrelevant because times had irreversibly changed and there was no going back to the past.

Secularization became a legacy of reformed Catholicism in the West. In their reduced territories and more so in America, Catholics would benefit from greater freedoms resulting from the influence of the Reformation. At the same time, those who claim the Reformation as their spiritual heritage have a debt to the Catholic tradition for redefining in the Counter-Reformation the frame of reference against which Protestants could measure their challenges and refine their faith.

In summary, the public record, now half a millennium old, demonstrates how Lutheranism served as a bridge between numerous political and religious groups committed to the social and spiritual well-being of Nurnberg. Lutheranism stood for evolutionary – not revolutionary – change in an era of complex socio/religious ferment.

The Reformation of the Keys could be faulted – perhaps because of the personal inclinations of the author – for assessing too artlessly and irenically, in places, the circumstances it evaluates and for putting the most charitable construction on some quite unseemly behaviour.

Nevertheless, the author prompts our praise for offering an intriguing perspective of how early to mid-sixteenth century Nurnberg was transformed while navigating severe societal destabilization that continued for years into the future. His work helps to counter some current Reformation historiography that gives undue attention to discipline and control issues and not enough regard to serious efforts at integrating the Lutheran principles of freedom and grace into the civic process.

6.

Counterbalancing religious and political influences in times of destabilization is the continuing task of any society. Today, we may find it hard to identify with or fully appreciate the Nurnberg story. But, short of living in social anarchy, the call to work for renewal in the midst of seeming chaos remains the same for us.

Reviewer's Bio: Wayne A. Holst is a writer and a facilitator of adult spiritual development at St. David's United Church, Calgary, Alberta. He served as an ordained Lutheran pastor, missionary and church executive for twenty-five years and taught religion and culture at the University of Calgary for more than a decade.

Addendum on Confession Today

For a reflection on contemporary confession here is a link to an article by this reviewer for Sojourners Magazine, May-June, 2002. It is entitled –

CONFESSION: Doorway to Forgiveness, by Jim Forest. Orbis Books (2002): <http://www.sojo.net/index.cfm?action=magazine.article&issue=soj0205&article=020532e> (shortlink version) <http://makeashorterlink.com/?B4C613F8C>

More Discussion on Patterson, the Jesus Seminar and Jesus Himself

Colleagues,

Here are some items in the continuing discussion. Peace & Joy!
Ed Schroeder

I. Author Steve Patterson responds to the folks who had something to say about his book last week: A few comments on the postings from last week...

One person, who has not read my book, thought I sounded much like Crossan. He's right. I've learned just about everything from Crossan, though I try to shine that light in some different directions. The overarching framework is the same, but the territory covered in the three main chapters is different. As for the rest of the Jesus Seminar, you'll find more diversity there than you think.

To Ed [Schroeder], and to Fred [Danker], whose criticisms I take much to heart: one very important thing I think I have learned from Crossan, especially in his book on Christian origins, *The Birth of Christianity*, is this: the Jesus movement was not a Christian answer to the inadequacies of Judaism, but a very Jewish answer to the problems with empire. This is an insight that I believe we need to take to heart, both for the sake of overcoming our historic anti-Jewish tendencies and gaining critical distance on our own nation's aspirations to empire (with

wide-spread Christian endorsement). By the way, I do not think this makes my take on Jesus less Jewish. Jesus the victim joins thousands of other Jewish victims of empire in the period of Christian origins. The martyrdom tradition, through which I read Paul and the gospels, is thoroughly Jewish. The Jesus (and the Jesus movement) I have tried to reconstruct is Jewish... just not anti-Jewish. Through him the Jewish God of justice for the poor and the outcast speaks a word of truth to empire: the first will be last, and the last first. Fred: I think Luke gets that just about right, but he doesn't want to scare away respectable Gentiles, so after he gets through the downright treasonous Magnificat, he softens the blow to empire, especially in Acts. As for Matthew's Sermon on the Mount, I take the antitheses and the rest of the material in ch. 5, and the anti-pharisaic tirade in ch. 23, as the product of Matthew's tussle with Pharisaic Judaism after Javneh. I would not appeal to this as evidence of Jesus' own views.

Finally, if my concerns with anti-Judaism and empire seem too contemporary for the purposes of pure history, I'll risk the criticism. Schweitzer was right: historians always look into the well of history and see their own reflections. That is what historians are supposed to do, so long as the past itself is not obscured in the process. We look to history to see ourselves in it, to see our issues in a new light, to ponder our questions with the aid of the past. And sometimes our present helps us to see things in the past we would otherwise have missed. I believe we've been fairly un-self-conscious historically about the way our texts and our theology have been co-opted for empire, and used in the service of anti-Semitism. I have seen-Crossan has helped me see-strong

elements in the tradition that would block such directions as these and tried to underscore them. I think this is important to do in our time. This is how I believe the Jesus of history addresses us in our present. But this moment, too, will pass, and our insights, such as they are, will become dated. In the Jesus Seminar we never tried to fool ourselves into thinking we had settled things for all time. We were just trying to think new thoughts about the relevance of the tradition in our time.

To those of you who gave this little book a chance, thanks for the indulgence.

Steve Patterson

II. From The Very Reverend J. C. Michael Allen, retired Dean, Christ Church Cathedral, St. Louis. Dear Ed, This past week, I have been pondering your take on Stephen Patterson. I wish I could address my concerns more clearly, but here goes.

I think you are both preaching too small a gospel. That is, none of us preaches a large enough gospel. We either come down hard on the divinity of Christ and light on the humanity of Jesus, or the other way around. We are either too earthy, or too other worldly.

I owe this understanding to my reading long ago of Anders Nygren's "Agape and Eros." We mortals do at best an inadequate job of dealing with the essential mystery of God and the Son of God. In fact, that, as I understand it, was what the Reformation was all about, the depravity of our reason as well as our will. We never get it quite right. So we have to try again and again.

As for me, given my personal history, and my role as a

pastor, I side with Patterson.

My father and his friends were all “premature Anti Fascists.” They were not Communists, though god knows they were so accused. That is they warned us all of the danger of Fascism long before the West was prepared to see the danger, while the western elites were supporting Hitler. And my father and his friends all paid a high price for their integrity.

They all suffered many defeats. Harsh defeats. In my father’s case, after serving in the invasion of Morocco as an “assimilated” Colonel in charge of Army Psychological Warfare, he came home and sank into a deep depression from which he never recovered.

So, the question in my mind as I grew up, the question that led me to the gospel, was and is – is there no vindication for those who have taken a stand for truth, who have fought for justice and been gunned down? Do the Fascists in fact inherit the earth?

These are not academic questions. Nor are they abstract. They are of the essence of living. The answer I found was that the resurrection of Jesus the Christ is God’s answer: yes those who “hunger and thirst for right to prevail” (NEB) do receive vindication. The resurrection of Jesus is the vindication of his life and ministry preaching the Empire of God in place of the Empire of Rome.

My father did not die in vain. And so I can do battle for justice as well in the sure and certain hope of the resurrection from the dead.

The gospel is after all the hope of all those who then and now struggle for peace and justice.

Love and peace,
Michael

PS from EHS

Beginning Sunday February 26 and for most of the month of March, D.v., Marie and I will be away from St. Louis. If possible, incommunicado, although our kids will know where we are. Four guest writers will be anchoring ThTh posts during the month. Should you just HAVE TO get a message our way, son Nathan (Crossings listserve master) is also our private message-master.

Reader Response to last week's review of Stephen Patterson's book BEYOND THE PASSION. RETHINKING THE DEATH AND LIFE OF JESUS.

Colleagues,

Last week's ThTh 400 posting elicited some mail. Here are some of the responses. Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

STEPHEN PATTERSON, the book's author

First, thanks for honoring me with a lengthy piece like this. Though you clearly disagree, you are also laudatory at places, which I very much appreciate.

I think the piece is fair.

In the chapter on "Martyr" I do attempt to explain the concept of reconciliation between God, angered by human rebelliousness, and those who look to the martyr's death as vicarious, "for us." So, I don't altogether overlook this important aspect of (especially) Paul's thinking about Jesus' death. However, I also (in fairness to your characterization of my point of view) express the fact that I do not find such ideas to be theologically illuminating. The point I expected comment on, however, was my interpretation of Romans 5:10, where Paul seems to be saying (fully congruous with current ideas about martyrdom) that the sacrificial death of Jesus reconciles us to God, but salvation comes by taking up the life of Jesus—that is, embracing the cause for which the martyr died. This strikes most (not just good Lutherans!) as bald works righteousness. But there it is. I can see no more natural way to read this text and all the surrounding material on Abraham (where one is counted righteous by one's faithfulness to God) and Adam (where death is overcome by obedience to God). For Paul, in Romans 5:10, reconciliation is a past event, but salvation lies still in the future and involves a particular way of life. I wouldn't be offended if you went back and called attention to this reading of things and gave me the proper Lutheran tongue-lashing it will seem to deserve. This, at any rate, may be a key text in which my way of seeing things (salvation is ethics) is tested.

But I do wish to be very clear about this point. At the end of the day, I do not think that for Paul or anyone else salvation comes because of ethics. Salvation is ethics... or ethos, if you prefer. All that God holds in store for us can be had in the embrace of life lived in love for God and neighbor. The Kingdom of God is in the midst of you. It is possible to be "in Christ" now. This does not address the question of the afterlife. But in the gospels and in Paul the afterlife is seldom more than an afterthought.

Thanks again, Steve

PS I think I'll keep that typo ["canon fodder"] in the next edition. I'm starting to like it. (:

FRED DANKER, retired Semtex Professor (New Testament)

- 1. It is odd that SP views Rome as the contra for Jesus' agenda. A primary reason for rejection of Jesus as Messiah relates to his apparent disinterest in challenging Rome.*
- 2. The Kingdom of God is God's reigning activity as envisaged by OT prophets and psalmists. Ps. 145 is a preeminent exhibition of the idea, and Luke 1 echoes it. Deliverance from the enemies of Israel and renewed relationship with God are here the major facets of the "Reigning" idea. Luke 4:18 outlines the program, and 4:43 restates it. The reign of God includes especially demonstration of God's concern for and interest in people who are marginalized. A total overhaul of attitudes exhibited by the bureaucratic religious structures as well as by ordinary people is required. Matthew 5-7 and*

Luke 6 are in effect a description of the reign in action.

- 3. The NT Jesus is not 'Jesus contra Rome'. He is rather the Jesus who challenges the Judean establishment to rethink its acclaimed interest in the authority of Moses. Jesus' performance of miracles on the Sabbath, to cite but one example, is an "uppity" performance. By not endorsing Jesus and instead enticing Rome to view Jesus as suspect the leaders of Israel invite their own judgment. Rome's major interest was the maintenance of public order. Jesus endorsed Rome in that respect. He was not sponsoring a dissident way of life. Any dissidence had to do with Judean misapplication of Mosaic legislation. Rome moves in on Jesus when Judean bureaucracy and its supporters distort the deeds and words of Jesus.*
- 4. The view of Jesus' death as a sacrifice with an anti-Rome edge is an oversimplification. The death of Jesus is first of all an exhibition of the bankruptcy of bureaucratic thinking in Jerusalem. The resurrection demonstrates God's generous forgiveness of the perpetrators of Jesus' death. That is the climactic expression of God's reign, according to Luke.*
- 5. SP's reading of Hebrews obscures the intramural Israelite debate expressed in its pages. At every turn Hebrews shows how Jesus trumps apparent Mosaic dismissal of his Messianic identity.*
- 6. SP lacks a clear understanding of the idea of "resurrection" in the ancient polytheistic world. "Dead men rise up" never was the general consensus. Membership in the elite club of the immortals was on a different level of perception.*
- 7. The NT writers do not reduce the resurrection of Jesus to a metaphor. He was not a good candidate, given the manner of his death. John the Baptist would have been a more*

likely choice. Moreover, Paul himself does not focus on Jesus as the resurrected one, but on Jesus as the crucified one. The fact, according to the consentient voice of the Christian community, is that the resurrection of Jesus constituted a problem for the followers of Jesus. The raising of a miscreant seemed to be out of character for God. Hence it was necessary to get the rationale for the crucifixion straight in order to understand the resurrection. In this way we are able to answer the question: "Why Jesus?"

8. By taking on an establishment that distorted the authentic Mosaic record, Jesus ensured his own death. And Paul summed the matter: The Law killed Christ. For Law, without submission to God's reigning interest, always kills. And from the killing process one needs salvation so that the ethical interests of Jesus can be realized. The Reigning moment of God is in itself a message of forgiveness. According to the NT witness, those who reject it affirm their own autonomy and thus in reality the rejection of Moses. Hence a word like this: We have no king but Caesar. The irony, according to the evangelists, Paul, and the writers of Hebrews and Revelation, is that those who seem to be most Semitic end up being anti-Semitic, for Jesus is the incorporation of Israel. The Church has much unfinished business on this score, notwithstanding recent decrees and posturing in numerous other directions. Dietrich Bonhoeffer required of the Church that it adopt a discrete atheism. Today the call is for the Church to become Mosaicly Semitic in depth.
9. Your point about Judaism disappearing in SP from the life of Jesus requires no reinforcement.
10. Ultimately, SP's interpretation follows the kind of analysis one might make of a dramatic production. What

does the dramatist have in mind in the twists and turns of the plot and development of the characters and their interrelationships? The application of such critique to the NT is hazardous. Dramatists are creators of events and characters. We can analyze the dramatists' strategies and tactics. But the New Testament writings are of a different order. For them the events they record belong to the real world. The ways in which they present them tell us something about their understandings of such events. But it is an entirely different matter for a modern interpreter to replace the events with perceptions that in effect equal allegorization.

Just a few thoughts brought on by your diligent probing,

Retired Theology Prof in Texas

Two weeks ago I sat through four lectures in San Antonio by John Dominic Crossan – six hours worth. So when I read your review of Patterson's book, I felt deja vu all over again. Practically the same words, phrases, thesis. The Jesus Seminar folk seem to be pretty monolithic.

Two Lutheran Pastors in Indiana. Brothers. One ELCA, one LCMS. Guess which is which.

I have not read the book either, but what a stunning tour de force! I run into this kind of ethics as salvation in the form of some liberal left of center politics all the time in my mainline protestant friends. Your book review gave me more ammunition. It was a great read. Peace.

Thanks for the review of Stephen Patterson. Once again I am glad that my salvation does not depend upon my courage to be, or my ethical production etc. I might be a lazy Christian, but first, last, and in between I'm God's handiwork. And that's just what I need to hear day after day after day. Thanks again for your weekly insights,

Peace.

An ELCA Seminary Professor

Your Karl Barth attribution [about scholars searching for the "historical Jesus" by peering down a deep well to see his face, and then describing the face they saw peering up at them] belongs rightfully to Albert Schweitzer, in his book "The Quest of the Historical Jesus," though KB, of course, also read and was influenced by AS. P.S. I learned that studying with you at the sem in '81. [Ed. Shows that not only my short-term memory is fading.]

Another Lutheran Theology Professor (Ethics)

I really appreciated again this thoughtful exegesis of SP's exegesis. A few thoughts come immediately to mind:

1. Might the biggest problem for postmodern theology still be the enduring problem for theology before it was postmodern: namely, underappreciating [in the paradigm of the Crossings matrix] the D-3 depth-dimension of the human problem, and the P-4 dimension of "deep" Gospel needed to heal that diagnosis? My sense is that SP would

have no idea about what God you are talking about in wrath and criticism, because that God is not at all present in his working theology of Jesus.

- 2. We can appreciate that SP, along with many others, even many an ethicist (e.g., Reinhold Niebuhr), do well or pretty well with the Diagnosis step 1 (people's bad morals, bad behavior) & sometimes D-2 stuff of misplaced faith—even to crossing it over to the Good News of P-5 and P-6 (right faith and right behaviors). But they miss the depth of THEOLOGICAL ethics by leaving the God who criticizes (even to death) sinners but also gives them a Lord who claims them back from death into life. When you spoke of how we are now in the third or fourth round of searching for the historical Jesus, might all this searching itself be an indicator of how the D-3 God is keeping us in the dark? (deus absconditus)*
- 3. Speaking as a theological ETHICIST, we need not (even as Apol.4 did not) leave out a connection between faith and works. But we do need to appreciate the horse of faith (and all that it means when Jesus says, "Your faith has saved you") before the cart of works.*

For the "Jesus Seminar," Just How Much Jesus is Needed?

Colleagues,

This week a book review.

Stephen J. Patterson. BEYOND THE PASSION. RETHINKING THE DEATH AND LIFE OF JESUS. [Minneapolis: Fortress Press. 2004] x, 161 pp. Paper. US\$18.

Marie and I attend an early morning [every other Tuesday at (ugh!) 7 a.m.] Bible class that has been running for 16 years already. With our pastor at the helm we mix-and-match studying the Bible and books about the Bible. We meet at the home of folks who are just around the corner from our Bethel Lutheran Church,. They crank up the coffee pot and we take turns bringing the edibles. Right now, in preparation for Lent, we've started Stephen Patterson's [hereafter SP] book. We've had two sessions—and many of the folks around the big table are taken, some maybe even smitten, with SP. He's a winsome writer, articulate in arguing his case. SP is actually a local guy, professor of New Testament at Eden Theological Seminary, just two suburbs away from where we meet.

SP's fundamental thesis is that Christian piety almost everywhere focuses on the death and resurrection of Jesus, but gives no similar attention to the words and works, the LIFE of Jesus, even though those texts-from-life take up most of the four gospels. For Patterson, the BIG stuff about Jesus is in those texts-from-life. How the death of Jesus was interpreted by his followers after the fact, and what they really meant when they said "He is risen," are not unimportant. But they are all consequences from those slice-of-life items. So, first things first, please.

I should tip my hand at the outset. As SP pieces together what the Good News is by "rethinking the death and life of Jesus," the Gospel he comes up with is too small. Way too small. I'll first try to articulate that SP gospel, and then spell out my caveats.

1. For SP (and the vast majority of NT scholars today) the key term in the words & works of Jesus is “the empire of God.” SP’s preference for “empire of God” over other translations for the Greek term “*basileia tou theou*”—kingdom, reign, realm, regime of God—is linked to his conviction that Jesus’ major agenda addresses his major antagonist, the “empire of Rome.” That empire, of course, was the harsh occupation force in Jesus’ homeland—and the power that killed him on the cross. Throughout his book SP always has Rome as the “contra” for Jesus’ agenda.
2. And what Jesus’ alternative godly “empire” is can almost be predicted by what Rome’s was not. Justice for injustice, love for cruelty, egalitarianism for hierarchicalism, mercy for military, peace for war, persuasion for coercion—and especially Jesus’ affirming the nobodies vs. Rome’s adulation for somebodies. [ThTh readers have heard me moan before—in missiology postings, e.g.—that today’s penchant to define God’s Kingdom in Christ as “the universal rule of love and justice in the world” (a definition repeated many times by SP) is a flatout misreading of that cardinal term in the NT. More below.]
3. Jesus himself is a “nobody,” a peasant nobody, in SP’s reading of the gospels. He speaks for and to the nobodies of his day, the rejects of the world he lives in. Which would be OK, so far as the occupying Rome legions are concerned, if he didn’t keep making such a fuss about it, rubbing it in by calling his project an alternate “empire,” and even without a single sword or spear in his motley menagerie of followers, being so “in your face” to all that Rome stood for. So he wound up a Victim of the Pax Romana—which was for the “pacified” anything but Shalom.

4. "Victim" is one of SP's 3 major chapter headings for "rethinking" Jesus. That chapter, using recent scholarly findings about the Roman Empire—sometimes brilliantly so—chronicles why and how Rome throttled him for his "alternate empire" uppityness. Yes, Jewish leaders were in the mix, but not as independent players, just as Rome's sycophants, themselves conned into the "power of patronage," the brick-and-mortar that held Rome's empire together. The NT Jesus is "Jesus contra Rome."
5. Next chapter is "Martyr," how the Jesus-followers made their first sense for themselves of this "crucifixion of a nobody." Here too SP knows the territory, the martyrological literature in the Jewish [Eleazar vs. Antiochus] and Hellenistic [Socrates as seen by Epictetus] world, and he crosses it with the crucified Jesus exquisitely. In sum, "the martyrological tradition gave early Christians a way of using the death of Jesus, terrifying though it was, as a source of power for those who would take up his dissident way of life, and his cause of a new empire of God." (p.67)
6. The final term is "Sacrifice." SP's stunning cultural reportage shows how sacrifice was just as constituent to Greco-Roman common life as it was to Judaism. And absolutely necessary to keep local communities—yes, the vast Roman empire as well—from falling apart. The anti-Rome edge in viewing Jesus' death as sacrifice is that his followers saw in his death the end of all sacrifice—especially and explicitly any sacrifice mandated by the Roman empire. They did so for the simple reason that they were living "in another empire, an empire of God, and looked forward to the day when the empire they had come to despise would cease to be." With a unique reading of the NT Letter to the Hebrews SP proposes that "Jesus died as a sacrifice that really was no sacrifice.

His sacrificial death was in reality a brutal state execution—for his followers the sacrifice to end all sacrifice.” Thus, after Rome “sacrificed” Jesus to keep its empire from disintegration, his followers moved “out of that ordered world of their past, a world that had cast Jesus out, and into some unknown future. Jesus’ fate took him out of the ordered world, the city, ‘outside the camp,’ into that great beyond of chaos and no-place” [Utopia]. Leaving it all behind, “the empire and its gods, the Temple and its altar,” they set out on “the mysterious journey into faith: a life of trusting God to bring them to some new and better place, a ‘city that is to come.’ . . . [T]he unclean and unsettling death of Jesus became the sacrifice to end all sacrifice, and an invitation to take leave of one’s home fires to seek life in the liberating and terrifying experience of no-place.” [p.100f.]

7. Comes now an Epilogue: “The Resurrection of a Nobody.” In the NT era resurrections happened all the time. Jesus did so for Lazarus and for Jairus’ daughter. Paul did the same out on the mission field. Ditto for other apostles. Ditto for other holy men in the Hebrew scriptures and in the non-Biblical world. So “resurrection proves nothing.” But why did the followers of Jesus, also the NT writers, make such a big deal of Jesus’ resurrection? The resurrection metaphor was the culturally available wineskin for speaking of the impact Jesus had on them well before he died—during the days of his living, acting and speaking in their midst. Jesus’ post-easter “appearances” reported in the NT are not face-to-face interactions between master and disciples. Rather they “refer to spiritual ecstasy, experienced by many in the act of gathering for worship. These moments of spiritual ecstasy, experienced individually and in communal worship, now became experiences of the risen Christ.” “Perhaps in the inner

dimensions of the spiritual lives of ... James and Peter, who had been particularly close to Jesus, these experiences took on the more personal character of an encounter with their former teacher and friend, his tortured body now transformed and freed from his former suffering. These 'appearances' of Jesus became for them the reauthorization for continuing what he had begun, their apostolic mandate."

SP concludes: "The resurrection proclamation is finally about the spiritual life Jesus unleashed among his followers. It is about the decision to believe in Jesus and to give oneself over to the Spirit to be discovered in his life." Notice. Resurrection is nothing at all about Jesus himself. It's "finally" about something going on in the disciples. The vision Jesus followed is resurrected in his followers after his death. Jesus was not.

8. After the epilogue comes a conclusion with a feisty couple of preachy paragraphs at the end. In some prior chapters SP had also ended with a homiletic addendum. E.g., the Victim chapter: "Jesus died the victim of an empire that is not so different from our own." Then comes a side-by-side of Pax Romana and Pax Americana. The peace offered in both is "not God's peace—at least not as it appeared in the life of Jesus, the victim of the world's last great pax." Also the Martyr chapter concludes by asking the reader: "Could the martyrological tradition prove meaningful even today?" The answer is yes, and here is the axiom: "the courage to die for one's convictions is preceded by the courage to live out one's convictions." [I can't resist this one. In distinguishing between valid/invalid dying for a cause SP 's editors let this one slip, where SP "draws the line between the martyr and canon (sic!) fodder." (p.67)]

9. In the feisty couple paragraphs at the very end SP badgers “Christian believers and theologians[!] today,” who “generally . . . approach the question of Jesus’ death” unconcerned about “the things Jesus said that led to his death. What he lived or died for is of no concern.” Thus they (we?) have “killed Jesus by having killed the vision.” To wit, Jesus’ own vision of God’s empire that SP has shown us. These folks, we folks, have done “what the cross could not do” to Jesus: killed him. Instead of attending to the “cause” for which Jesus died, “Jesus’ death has become for us a mythic event connected to the universal problem of death and the mysterious and frightening end of human life. ... The resurrection assures us of our own immortality.” Such misreading of Jesus vexes SP.

And then comes the zinger of his critique. For such misreaders “Ethics are never as important as salvation.” SP’s final words are a plea [*vox clamantis in deserto?*] to reverse the order of those two nouns. The empire of God IS ethics, “the universal rule of love and justice in the world.” (p.129) Though we today generally “do not look to Jesus for a way of life, but for salvation, . . . this was not so for the friends and followers of Jesus. For them the empire of God WAS salvation.”

Comments:

SALVATION

- A. SP critiques “bad” CHRISTIAN piety today because “ethics are never as important as salvation.” To which I say: There is no salvation agenda at all in SP’s 131 pages of rethinking the Death and Life of Jesus. Even though he asserts at the end that “the empire of God WAS the salvation,” for him the salvation—and the empire of God—that Jesus brought IS ethics. It’s getting folks to

shape-up according to the “universal rule of love and justice in the world.” In Reformation Latin it’s all “coram hominibus,” but not “coram deo.” It’s a transaction face-to-face with humans, but not the human interface with God. But that’s not what the NT means with the term “salvation.” Never. SP’s Jesus never says (or does!) anything about the divine-human interface, getting sinners reconciled to God, getting them forgiven, getting the unrighteous made righteous again, getting the fracture between God and Adam’s offspring restored to Shalom. If that is not THE central salvation agenda of Jesus in the 4 gospels, then what is? And if the death of Jesus is not at the center of his “It is finished” with THAT agenda, then what is? Apropos of what’s “important,” THIS salvation agenda—never mentioned—is patently of no importance at all for SP’s Jesus. It’s “ethics ueber alles.” **THE EMPIRE OF GOD**

- B. Ethics is, as SP openly says page after page, what the Empire of God is all about. And that is where I think SP is fudging on (radically misreading) the NT canon he interprets for us. The Kingdom of God in the NT is not what SP tells us it is. Not ethics is salvation, but getting sinners forgiven is salvation. Talk about “canon” fodder! Granted, there’s a huge debate about that these days among the pros, like SP, and among the pastors and people in the congregations. But still we must thank SP for formulating it so precisely. Is God’s kingdom in Christ ethics or salvation?
- C. The either/or is this: is God’s new regime in Christ crucified and risen God’s own “regime change” with sinners OR is it God in Jesus visioning and enacting “the universal rule of love and justice in the world?” My contention is that ALL the references to “kingdom of God” in the NT speak of salvation as God and sinners

reconciled. KoG occurs at the divine-human interface, the primal relationship of humankind. We all stand coram deo—every moment of our lives. [Run the concordance study on KoG suggested below to see for yourself.] All KoG references are staged there. None addresses the universal rule of love and justice in the world. That, so it seems to me, is a fabrication. Textual canon fodder. What makes it God's "new" regime, new deal (covenant), is that apart from Christ crucified and risen God continues to deal with sinners according to his "old" regime, by "counting trespasses," not forgiving the trespassers. It's patently a salvation-agenda, a God-and-sinners transaction, whereby sinners get un-sinned so that they get a new ethos (quality to their lives) and thereupon a new ethics. But the regime change happens before the ethics happen, or the ethics don't happen at all.

JUDAISM DISAPPEARS FROM THE LIFE OF JESUS

- D. Another signal of SP's ho-humming the REAL salvation agenda of Jesus by making ethics = salvation, is this book's total disregard for the "Jewish agenda" of Jesus. As SP reads the gospels, all of the opposition/antagonism to Jesus comes from Roman empire agents. We never hear anything from SP about Jesus' ongoing debate with Jewish folks, about conflictive conversations about God (all those Sabbath fractures Jesus makes), about rightful reading of the Hebrew scriptures, about "Go and learn what this means." The only place where Jewish leaders come into SP's text is where they are in cahoots with Rome and thus oppose Jesus for the same reason that the Roman politicians do. Apart from those sell-out Jewish antagonists, you'd think that Jesus and the Jewish religious leaders were best of friends. Bypassing those umpteen conflict-pericopes between Jesus and his fellow

Jews, SP is being rather cavalier with the de facto agenda, both of these Jewish leaders and of Jesus in debate with them. But it figures. The Jewish agenda is from of old—Genesis to Malachi—a “salvation” agenda. It’s about healing Israel’s fracture with God, a.k.a. broken covenants. Therefore if you deem that agenda to be uninteresting, or passee, or already a done-deal, then ignoring the Jesus-and-Jewish-leaders debate makes sense. But to bypass this overarching and constant agenda in the gospel narratives is (seems to me) making more fodder out of the canon.

THE JESUS SEMINAR

- E. SP is a major voice in today’s “Jesus Seminar.” I’ve not followed this movement very closely, but from what I think I know, this book’s vision of Jesus and God’s empire is standard fare. Jesus-seminarists are the third (or is it the fourth?) wave in a two-century-long “quest for the historical Jesus.” Its goal: to determine what Jesus REALLY did and said before his followers started interpreting (and possibly mucking up) the data as they passed on his story from generation to generation. So you work your way through the jungle that has grown up around him in 2000 years—beginning already with the early growth that distorts the data which we encounter in the writings of the NT itself. It’s like that Yale professor’s discovery nearly a century ago (Hiram Bingham, 1911) of Machu Picchu in Peru. It’s still there, the Andean locals told him, almost 100% engulfed by centuries of vegetation, only little bits of the original city still sticking out. So he hacked his way through the overgrowth and underbrush and found the “historical Machu Picchu,” the fabled city as it really was.[I think it was Karl Barth who tweaked the first generation of historical-Jesus-questers as

scholars peering down into a deep well in their search for Jesus. In their books they then tell us about the face they saw looking up at them from the watery surface below. The Jesus in SP's study looks an awful lot like today's good-guy left-wing liberal-anti-militarist, anti-global capitalist, pro-human rights, anti-empire, opting for the nobodies in an America-dominated world.]

F. But which Jesus are SP and company looking for? Apparently NOT one who is interested in the Bible's own salvation agenda. That appears uninteresting. So if you are not looking for it, chances are good that you won't find it. And if there simply ARE buckets of salvation-agenda material in the canonical gospels, then you will have to "not see" them in order to miss them. Perhaps SP is so dismayed (see his concluding paragraphs) by the fundamentalist and biblicist smothering overgrowth about salvation, that he deems it impossible to cut through that jungle and ever get to the real Jesus. For whatever reason, he settles for ethics. That's what makes his gospel too small. He settles for pennies when he could have had pearls. He presents the pennies as though they ARE the pearls. Perhaps he thinks the salvation agenda is not pearly. Perhaps for him it is pennies. I wonder. In any case he opts for ethics over salvation. His ethical "empire of God IS salvation." But it's not what Jesus was talking about in the often-repeated words in the gospels: "Your faith has saved you. Go in peace." For the folks who heard such words from the historical Jesus, those were pearls-pearls of "great price." They weren't ethics. **A GOSPEL TOO SMALL**

G. When THE gospel shrivels, it becomes an "other" gospel. When you cast away salvation pearls, you are talking about another gospel. There is an apostolic caveat (worse actually, an anathema) about hustling other gospels. So

the real question SP leaves us with is not simply: Do you accept my proposed gospel of “the empire of God as a universal rule of love and justice in the world,” or don’t you? His real question is: will you cast away the Kingdom pearl of sinners being reconciled to God, in exchange for the Kingdom-as-ethics pearl I propose?

H. To which I’d say: Why take a frightfully diminished substitute—even though it is claimed that this ethical pearl IS salvation—when you could have the whole ball of wax? To wit: a really crucified and really risen Christ (not just “spiritually” risen within the disciples after Good Friday) as our connector with God and that same BIG Christ for ethics, our connector to the world and our fellow worldlings. Isn’t that what the NT gospels clearly and plainly offer, what they call THE Good News? Isn’t this THE kingdom of God—God’s mercy-management proposal for sinners? Only in Christ, of course. In all of God’s other regimes, trespasses get counted. That’s the bottom line that sinners need to be saved “from.” [Just for fun sometime, take a Bible-concordance and check all the “kingdom of God” passages in the NT. Wherever that term occurs, read “God’s NEW regime: no more trespass-counting, instead mercy-management of sinners,” and see what you get. Make sure you don’t miss St. Paul’s “regime-change” claim in Colossians 1:13f.] **THE “RISEN” CHRIST—NECESSARY OR NOT?**

I. If salvation = ethics, then there is no need for a resurrected Jesus. His vision—God’s empire of love and justice—survives his death. It is this VISION that is resurrected, resurrected in the hearts and minds of the disciples. That is salvation enough; that is resurrection enough. The vision doesn’t stay dead, even if Jesus does. But suppose the nemesis of un-salvation is much greater than the un-love/in-justice vision resident in human

hearts (at least SOME human hearts), a vision that then gets routinized in human societies and re-enforced by “Roman” empires. Suppose God himself, the cosmic critic of unlove and injustice, were the nemesis both of such empires and of such human hearts. What would salvation have to be then? Suppose that God’s verdict on such unloving and un-just folks were a death sentence—grim as that may seem, though eminently just in divine jurisprudence—“the wages of sin,” etc. Would anyone in such a fix call it salvation, merely being offered an alternate ethical vision? From Genesis 2&3 through Psalm 90, Isaiah 53, 1 Cor.15 and all the way to Revelation 21 death is the nemesis underlying all false visions. Someone has to conquer death if salvation is to happen for folks with such bad vision(s).

- J. Paul says it simply (1 Cor. 15): If Jesus didn’t lick death, then death still reigns. Paul’s claim is triadic: death is the last enemy; death’s deadly stinger (the lethal cocktail in it) is sin; and sin gets its clout from the law (“karma” rules—you get what you’ve got coming). Unless all three of these are trumped, nothing has changed. Un-salvation at the coram deo interface is the empire still in charge. New visions—even coming from a victimized, martyred, sacrificed Jesus (for whom death too has the last word)—change nothing on the salvation agenda. We’re still stuck in un-salvation. If un-salvation persists, Jesus died in vain.
- K. SP doesn’t need a resurrected Jesus because his salvation agenda is so small. Therefore his gospel—Jesus as victim, martyr, sacrifice, but not risen—is so small. Way too small. So he can put Socrates and Jesus side-by-side, finally mirroring each other in dying for a new moral vision. But it’s all small potatoes alongside the real salvation agenda which is cosmic: sin, death, the law.

These are not “flesh and blood” nemeses. New ethical visions won’t faze them at all. Instead they must be engaged and defeated. If not, they win. Death stilll has the last word.

The BIG Gospel, the big cannon in the NT canon, says we do indeed have such a Christus Victor. The emblems of his victory—for us and for our salvation—are two beams of wood AND a deserted tomb, a death defeated. At the core Christians do not believe in a Christic vision. Instead, they trust a Christus victor. That’s what God’s empire in Christ is all about. That’s the salvation offer of the Christian Gospel. Apart from that salvation there IS no Christian ethic.

But there is Christus-victor salvation. There is Christus-victor ethics. Consequently there is . . . Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

An Op-Ed “State of the Union Address” for the USA 2006

Colleagues,

I listened & watched President Bush give his “State of the Union” address Tuesday evening (January 31), even took notes. I read the printed text in the paper the next morning. Before long this Op Ed alternative began to percolate. Here’s what it looked like when it came off the stove. Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

***“FROM ABRAHAM–VIA AMOS AND AUGUSTINE–TO ABRAMOFF”
(with citations from the official address of Jan.
31 indicated)***

ABRAHAM

My fellow Americans. God is NOT blessing America. “The state of our union is” NOT “strong.” It is perilous. Precipitous. We are already near the cliff’s edge and we are still marching in a direction we call forward. Though some may say: “There is no honor in retreat,” if straight-ahead means suicide, then where is the honor in that? Retreat is absolutely right, the essence of honor, when you are going in the wrong direction. Not to retreat from suicide is surely dishonorable.

I’ve captioned this opening section ABRAHAM. The promise to Abraham was to be a “blessing to the nations.” God blessing our nation has been a mantra for ages among us. When a nation is heading for a cliff-fall, retreat is honorable. The Abrahamic word for that is repentance. That word does not mean feel-sorry-for-what-you’ve-done–though there is honor in ‘fessing up when you are simply wrong, and stupidity in not doing so. Its literal Biblical meaning is simply turn around. But if we are blind about the precipice just ahead, about the wrong direction we are going, then we will continue to hype “our greatness, our competitive edge . . . our compassion . . . the character of our country . . . our success of freedom,” in short, our standard list of self-congratulatory shibboleths, and in doing so we are going the way of Goliath. If that is the way in which “we accept the call of destiny,” then Goliath’s destiny is our destiny. It is the God-given destiny of every historical Goliath in human history.

We need help. BIG help. The sort Abraham got when he too was entangled in the Tigris and Euphrates kingdoms four millennia ago, the same place we are entangled today. Though he apparently thought that this was his place to be, God said: Not so. Abraham's Ur of the Chaldees—the USA empire of that day—was very religious, with deities galore. But the TRUE God said: “Not my kind. Split. I'm taking you elsewhere. U of C is the wrong way to go.” America today is also very religious, something that makes other nations marvel, because we also are (and export) a super-secular culture. In some places it may be sheer schizophrenia (double-mindedness, the Bible calls it). In other places perhaps calculated camouflage. Until Muslims showed up in our land (now in the many millions outnumbering American Jews!) and so long as we overlooked American Judaism, we called ourselves a Christian nation. Some Americans—despite our patent religious pluralism today—still insist on that label. But apart from hyping allegedly Christian moral imperatives, few probe very deeply into what that might mean—if it were indeed true, if it were not an oxymoron.

What might it be if we strove first to be simply an “Abrahamic” nation? First off, no notions of empire. A pox on Ur of Chaldeanism. [And for that we could invoke another worthy whose name starts with A, namely, Augustine. See below.] His call was to be a blessing to the nations. Not empires, just nations. Therefore not any messianism to spread his ideology to the other nations. Or if there is an Abrahamic messianism, it was a messianism of the message, not of the military. Was it Stalin who hyped the validity of his message because it came from the barrel of a gun? Where is his empire now? Or was it Mao, whose empire is now morphing into our own global capitalist empire? If we are indeed inches from the edge in our own imperial march, what is China's some-day-to-be-manifest destiny? But I digress. This is the state-of-the-union address for America,

not China.

America and Abraham. That already has promising overtones for Christians, Jews and Muslims in our nation. He is patriarch for them all. I am not proposing the “salvation” agenda that accompanied Abraham, but merely his “secular” calling to be a “blessing to the nations.” God’s blessings are what we invoke when we say God bless America. This is not a soteriological call. It focuses on the providing, the protecting, the preserving of daily life that substantively corresponds to our constitution. The blessing business is the essence of good government.

But now some reflection on the notion of empire. Abraham and offspring were called to be a non-empire. “Just” to be a people, nothing more. So what’s an empire and why is that a no-no for the offspring of Abraham? Enter Augustine. [Crossings readers have heard this before in these postings. Here’s a slice of a ThTh posting shortly after Sep. 11, 2001.]

A word about empire from Augustine. Why did the Roman Empire fall? Rome went down the drain because of its own injustice. God doesn’t tolerate injustice forever. He is indeed longsuffering—even for the empire’s 1000 years (you know God’s idiosyncratic calendar)—but he does “count trespasses.” When the trespasser refuses to turn around, God finally visits the iniquity of the fathers upon the current population of the empire. Empires are in a bind, Augustine says, for by definition they cannot “turn around” and still be an empire. Why not? Because injustice is built into the very structure of an empire. For an empire to repent would mean to cease to be an empire.

How so? Empires are one people subjugating one or more other peoples. Rome subjugated other peoples both militarily and

economically [Sound familiar?] And that can never be done without injustice to the peoples under the thumb (or military boot) of the conquering ones in charge. So Rome may have called its imperial management of other peoples “pax romana,” but the pacified peoples themselves didn’t experience it that way. Just look at the NT gospels for evidence of what one conquered people thought about Rome’s control of their lives.

So it was not the Christians who brought about Rome’s downfall, he claims. It was God, the ultimate critic, finally giving the empire its just deserts. “And what I say of this [Roman] people and of this republic I must be understood to think and say of the Athenians or any Greek state, of the Egyptians, or of the early Assyrian Babylon, and of every other nation great or small.... [They] are void of true justice.”

That, my fellow Americans, is THE question for our nation, infinitely (I chose that adverb knowingly) more serious than Iraq or Iran, social security or Medicare, our addiction to oil or our multiple other national addictions—and afflictions. Is Augustine’s charge—“void of true justice”—true of us? We strut our “justice” as the model for the world. We engineer regime-change to bring that justice to other nations. We can’t imagine that all other nations wouldn’t rejoice to get it. So we can’t imagine that Augustine is talking about us. It’s inconceivable. But might he nevertheless be right? That God weighs us too (not just Saddam Hussein, Kim Jong Il, Hamas) and finds us wanting? What did Augustine mean when he spoke of justice, the justice that empires never have? How so is that possibly true of us? I don’t know, and I sense that our entire nation doesn’t know. I’m confident that we’re all conditioned NOT to believe it. But what if it were indeed so? What if our confidence were part and parcel of the problem of injustice? We need to find out—and quickly.

Therefore, I am appointing an “Augustine Commission” of religious leaders and jurisprudence scholars—from both sides of the aisle and also from outside the USA—to run the Augustinian test on our own American nation, and to come up with recommendations. For if Augustine is right about us, then the most serious national threat we face is not the terrorists, dreadful as they are, but the God we acclaim on every dollar bill. That deity, despite our national mantra, is NOT blessing us at present. Many of you agree. Might Augustine’s diagnosis apply to us? What makes this urgent is that the opposite of God’s blessing is something terrifying, far more so than the terrorists. The ruins of Rome, Babylon, Ur of the Chaldees testify to it.

[There are doubtless more changes we might ring on our Abrahamic heritage. For now I’m struck by the supposed wisdom, God-given wisdom, of being nation, not empire. Should the Augustine Commission complete its work in good time, I’ll ask them to work on the Abrahamic item as well—messianism by message, not by military.]

AMOS

It is becoming increasingly clear that the prophet Amos can help us Americans see the larger picture of our nation today. As he saw in his day, so might we get beyond the surface, the superficial, in addressing our national problems.

Amos chapter 4:

“I gave you cleanness of teeth and lack of bread . . . yet you did not return to me.

I also withheld the rain from you . . . yet you did not return to me.

I smote you with blight and mildew . . .yet you did not return to me.

I sent among you a pestilence . . .yet you did not return to me.

I overthrew some of you [in a cataclysm] like Sodom and Gomorrah . . . yet you did not return to me."

Remember, Amos is of the seed of Abraham. Consequently Muslims, Jews and Christians in America don't find him alien at the outset, though what he once said rattled chains—and still does. Yes, I know this may sound like violating the rubrics of church and state. But I'm not going to propose anything for anybody to "believe." Remember my caveat above: no soteriology. Instead let's just reflect on whether his historical analysis, his "editorial" on precipice-problems of his day is not illuminating for us to get insight to the non-blessings we may be experiencing. You know the laundry list that's daily in the news. You are enacting one element of it right now as one side of the aisle rises to applaud some of my words, while the other side stays seated. We ARE a nation divided. To which Amos might say: "Did I not divide your nation . . . and yet...."

Amos would encourage us to add that divine "Did I not do it . . ." to every item on our list of un-blessings: Katrina, oil addiction, border crossing chaos, national budget insanely out of balance, body-bags coming back from Iraq, health care meltdown, drugs on the streets, 30 million (!) poverty people in the richest nation on earth, etc. Amos does not give us clues on how God might have engineered these natural or human-generated dilemmas. He doesn't bother. That's clearly trivial to him in view of his more urgent agenda. His point is don't you notice not just "what all," but "who all" you are facing? Facing is a good word here. Catastrophes are a face-to-face with God, he claims. Better might be the modern word interface, "the place where independent entities meet and act upon or communicate with each other." [Webster 1997] Catastrophes, so

Amos, are God-human interfaces. The rightful response from the human side is to ask: What's the message in this catastrophe?

Old Adams and Old Eves regularly don't even hear that they are being asked, and so they become the askers: "How can a good God ...?" But that's ASKING a question, when, says Amos, we ought to be ANSWERING, answering the question addressed to us: "Why don't you turn around? You'll be 100% Humpty-Dumpty if you don't." No wonder blindness and deafness—even for folks with 20/20 clinical vision and equally healthy ears—is the standard Biblical diagnosis for folks facing catastrophes. They do not repent, turn around, but plow ahead toward the precipice. They just don't see what's going on. They just don't hear the message. It is sheer folly to say "we can control our destiny," as though we were the Lord of history, as though the divine-human interface didn't exist. "The only way...the only way...the only way...is for the USA [to] continue to lead[the world]." That too is folly.

But we are a religious nation. In that sense our dollar bills do not lie. Granted, not all Americans have the same religion, and some claim none. Yet the majority of us still concur about the divine-human interface of our personal and national histories. Therefore should the Augustine Commission [Lutherans take note. It's AC.] finish up both its Augustine and then its Abraham agendas, I'll ask them to address the one from Amos with its fundamental "turn around" verb, a.k.a. repentance. All three of these A's hang together.

There is a great historical precedent in our nation—from the presidential office—for attending to that. During our nation's Civil War, President Lincoln (also an Abraham!) called the nation to repentance as that cataclysm we inflicted upon ourselves unleashed its chaos. But Lincoln saw it with Amos-vision. It was not merely northern faces "meeting and acting

upon" southern faces. It was a God-human interface with both blue and grey on every battlefield. God was "acting upon and communicating with" the entire nation. Lincoln, incidently the first ever Republican president, heard the message. It was just one vocable: Repent. I'll want the AC to have that on their agenda. Perhaps a separate commision is called for. Repentance is an item too dangerous to be pushed to the back-burner.

ABRAMOFF

The moral turpitude in our national government is an abomination. Why should we be surprised that God is not blessing us? We are prone to point "abroad [at] poverty, corruption, despair, organized crime, human trafficking and the drug trade." But the world points back at us saying "Physician, heal thyself." Investigative reporters dig out the facts.

Repentance begins at home. When just one repents, so say the Christian scriptures (and Hebrew and Muslim scriptures concur), "heaven rejoices." Confident of the truth of this, I am releasing immediately all the data on my own association with Mr. Abramoff. His name nowadays signals the seamy side of capitalism in our nation with its invitation to greed. But that is just the tip of the iceberg, and the rest of us, the 6/7th of the iceberg beneath the surface, are all enmeshed in one way or the other. In the world's super-capitalist nation, there are 30 million of us who are in economic poverty. Abomination is the word for it. Yet our capitalist credo continues to whisper, even to capitalist millionaires of the past, billionaires now, that we all need "just a little bit more." The dollar bill we use daily is in constant conflict with God's name printed on it as the actual deity in whom we trust. The Abramoff attitude is everywhere. It's a huge non-blessing afflicting us.

I had intended to offer several paragraphs, seven of them,

beginning with “keeping America competitive” in my first draft. But wiser counsel prevailed and “tonight I am setting out a better path.” It is better because it goes deeper, a path more to the roots than what I had in those paragraphs, mainly, our national interface with God. Muslims, Christians and Jews all agree that from here our interface with one another unfolds. Foremost in our national story flowing from this primal interface is the blessing of freedom at the center of our national life. Ignoring the primal interface undermines human freedom. So yes, I am calling for “a revolution of conscience.” That is the prerequisite to our growing as “a hopeful society” [cited 6x in the last page of the original address], the hallmark of which is “compassion and care for one another.”

Lest you think again that I’m mixing church and state, I remind you that I am fulfilling an obligation, mandated by the US congress, reporting to you the “state of the union.” The overall state of the union is not good. Deep down we all know that. Our dollar bill claims that we seek to be a “new order of the ages.” In 1776 that was a feisty claim. Even religious. Most likely that common denominator of the national religion was merely deist. It was lifted from the Christian scriptures, but read so broadly that it didn’t rule out Jews. And wouldn’t fence off citizens of other world religions. In fact, our nation’s self-understanding at various junctures in our history has been replete with religious rhetoric. Manifest destiny, for example, from almost two centuries ago, is religious to the core. Manifest = epiphany. Destiny = eschatology.

It is not wrong for any nation to see God at work in its history. That’s admitting the divine-human interface of all human history. Where it goes wrong is when a people claims their nation to be God, even to being the Savior, the “Heil” (as in “Heil Hitler”) of the world. It goes wrong when it is the dollar that is almighty and people hang their hearts on

that god. It is wrong when their surge for self-preservation, their paranoia for security, smothers their call to servanthood. Then the primal interface has been deserted—although it really can't be deserted, but can be ignored—and that's where nations go over the cliff. Amos would say that God is pushing even though they are fully exercising their own muscles with that last leap.

Abramoff is not the villain whose comeupance will redeem us all. He's our representative. Thoughtful post-World War II German theologians talked about "Gesamt-schuld," collective guilt carried by an entire nation, even by those who were resisters to Hitler all the way. Bonhoeffer (whose 100th birthday is this Saturday) said so too about himself. That is a thicker/deeper question than fits this occasion. But we will be a better nation when we address that Gesamtschuld issue and when we follow through on what such an admission, such a confession, calls for.

Abraham, Amos, Augustine are resources for healing the Abramoff-ism (= demonized Abrahamic), the manifold un-blessings vexing our nation. That is the path I propose for my remaining years as your president. I shall aim to help us de-imperialize our nation. For me that means making you 300 million my primary care-agenda. It is not "isolationism" to see this as the president's main job, nor that of all Americans to "care" for all our people. It is folly to devise schemes to "keep America competitive" in the global economy and lose the souls (and bodies) of the people your government is called to care for. So "regime-change" also begins at home, "regime-change" in the way your lives are mis-ruled, in many cases terrorized and tyrannized, by the expanding set of un-blessings that afflict us. That means at the very outset affirmative action for all those 30 million whom your government and I your president are clearly failing. To signal realistically that shift to domestic

policy, I intend to recall our troops from Iraq, if possible to have them all home by Passover and Easter.

To remove the fuse from Radical Islam, our sworn enemy, or to call its bluff, I am accepting with this action the challenge of Osama bin Laden. In real war any overture of the enemy must be considered. Either we will call his bluff, or he will indeed call off his armies. And if he does not, we are not without resources for whatever may follow. I have previously called such a withdrawal "defeatism," but it can also be repentance. Those who say "our nation has only one option—to stay in Iraq," are not listening to the message coming from our Abraham/Amos heritage. If you members of congress find that action to be a high crime and misdemeanor, you may impeach me.

Repentance, turning back from the precipice, is good government, fundamental to the new order of the ages that we claim as our own. I call on America to reclaim our Abraham/Amos heritage. Yes, it's always risky. But security in human history does NOT come from the barrel of a gun. Mao, Stalin, Hitler too, were mistaken. For me and many of you that Abraham/Amos trajectory includes Augustine and Abraham Lincoln.

From the very beginning America has been a venture of faith. Though religiously tinted, it was fundamentally a political faith about the possibility of a new order of the ages in the secular world. The two interfaces—with God, with our fellow citizens—were the defining parameters. Because of the iffy-ness of the human side in those interfaces (even with the checks and balances built into our government) there never was any guarantee that this "new order of the ages" would survive the ages. No human institution is by definition immune to perversion. But for America's founders it seemed plausible, seemed possible. Even after two centuries plus in our history, the jury is still out. The evidence today, at best, is still

ambiguous. Yet it is from that AAAA heritage, focusing on the divine interface, that the venture continues to seem possible. That is whence security in human history comes, whence our nation's security comes, as much or as little as there ever really is. So we believe, so we trust, when we say "In God we trust."

Those are the grounds I reaffirm this evening and commend to you. They are the grounds for our becoming "a hopeful society." We may also be hopeful that under these quadruple-A rubrics God will bless America. Good Night.

Op Ed

Reverie on Ten Years of Crossings on the Internet: Sabbatheology #1 Redivivus

Colleagues,

Ten years ago tomorrow, January 27, 1996, the first Sabbatheology posting went out into cyberspace. It wasn't a text-study as the term "Sabbatheology" –pronounced "Sabbath Theology" (you use the "th" twice)–later came to designate. It was yours truly ruminating on what you see below. There were only a handful of folks who got this #1 on that Saturday. I don't remember who all they were. The caption was chosen simply because it was a Saturday when the piece was confected. When the next Saturday came there was another movement of the waters. And so it continued. Before long, text

studies on the upcoming Sunday's lectionary texts (ala the Crossings 6-step matrix) also appeared in these Sabbath postings, offered as a possible last-minute bonbon for the harried homilist slotted to be proclaimer in the next day's worship assembly. For 88 postings (till Nov. 15, 1997) the mix of text studies and random topics was the weekly routine. A heart operation (aortic valve transplant) was awaiting me at the end of 1997, so the Sabbatheology venture passed into the hands of Robin Morgan and Mike Hoy after #88. From then on Sabbatheology was text studies only with second generation Crossers in command. However . . .

When cardiac regularity returned, it was springtime and I had nothing to do. I asked myself: why did I "give it away?" I couldn't take it back. The "kids" were doing very well without me. It was a Thursday in May. I sensed a rumination coming on. The rest is history.

When you add 88 SabbTh postings to today's ThTh 398, you do not get ten years of weeks. There were a few wordless weeks during the first 88 postings plus a hefty hiatus connected with cardiovascular recuperation. But (sticking with the heart-muscle metaphor) on May 14, 1998 Thursday Theology started ticking, and now—with almost 400-in-a-row—ThTh postings haven't missed a beat. Mirabile dictu.

To see how the entire venture of Crossings on the Internet has grown, check the logs for 2005 @ <www.crossings.org/logs/> Last year the website averaged 1800 hits per day, with over 100,000 distinct computers served, and 1300 pages downloaded every 24 hours. If you want to know more (e.g., where did they all come from?) click on 2005 at the site. If curious, you can see the first ThTh at the Crossings website. Click on "Thursday Theology" on the homepage, then on 1998. Sabbatheology #1, the first-born among them all, never got to the Crossings website. There was no such thing ten years ago when it was launched. Here

it is.

Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

Jan. 27, 1996

Sabbath Theology #1

Here are a few bits/bytes that came my way recently. First off, this bon mot: German researchers attempted to uncover what specific behaviors contributed to people's longevity and success. They found that those who kiss their spouses every morning have fewer accidents on their way to work. In addition, "good morning kissers are absent [from work?] less often due to illness than non-kissers. And more amazing, kissers earn from 20% to 30% more and live almost 4 years longer!" A word to the wise...

And then a snippet from the good Jesuits at Georgetown University in Washington DC. From the Woodstock Report (Dec.1995). Ray Kemp, S.J., says in the interview of his "Preaching the Just Word" seminars: "One preacher said to us in a recent retreat, 'I have been aware for the last ten years that I have been preaching pious platitudes. WHAT I HAVE REALIZED THIS WEEK IS THAT MY OWN HEART AND SOUL HAVE NOT BEEN CONVERTED TO A RENEWED APPRECIATION OF THE GOSPEL. God is seeking to work in the world today through the instrumentality of the Church and through the instrumentality of, God help us, my own preaching.'"

How about this as an axiom? No one will do a very good job of preaching THE Gospel until the Gospel has been Good News to

his/her own heart and soul. And for us Augsburg Catholic types, this variation on that theme: No one will ever rightly distinguish law from gospel until they have been struck in person (in heart and soul) with said Good News and thus moved—first internally for their own selves—from law to gospel. Knowing the difference is a HEART's experience, not a mind's comprehension. That's what Paul was talking about, wasn't he, when in the opening chapters of Romans he says the Gentiles did have knowledge of God, but did not acknowledge God. That pun (also in Greek), gnosis vs. epignosis, designates two differing venues, different locations, for the Aha! about God, about Gospel, about the Gospel's quantum difference from the law.

To one of my e-mail bemoanings from Australia in 1994 [For that calendar year ehs was guest lecturer at the Lutheran Seminary in Adelaide] about my students' opaqueness in catching what the Good News was all about, Bob Schultz told me that same thing in other terms. It now comes home to me again as I hear of the lousy (non-Gospel, anti-Gospel) preaching of two dear friends, former students. The Crossings-alum reporting this to me asked: "How can that be? They were in the same classes with the rest of us, and it got through to me!" The obvious answer is: It did—well, maybe—get into their heads; it didn't get into their lives, their own personal histories. Now that I've composed this much, I'll cc. the message to a passel of folks, esp., Bob Schultz, and others to whom I doubtless owe letters. Cheers y'all!

So much for Sabbath-day theology on 1.27.96.
Ed Schroeder