

# The Gospel of Reconciliation—Paradise Restored or God's New Deal for Sinners?

Colleagues,

I got 32.8 million references when I typed "Reconciliation" into the Google search machine just now. So I won't go there to get my data.

The term is central to two items that are on my desk this week. I'll just stick with them.

One is a "call for papers" for next year's "12th Assembly of the International Association for Mission Studies [IAMS]" beginning on this very day (Aug. 16) in 2008 in Budapest, Hungary. The Theme is "Human Identity and the Gospel of Reconciliation: Agenda for Missionary Churches in the 21st Century." I've been attending IAMS gatherings since assembly #5 (Bangalore, India, 1982), so I'm signing up for this one too. There are differing opinions—no surprise—amongst the IAMS colleagues about the Gospel of Reconciliation, and voices for the Augsburg Aha! about that reconciliation are a still small voice.

The other is an ORBIS Books 2007 reissue of Bob Schreiter's 1988 publication "In Water and in Blood. A Spirituality of Solidarity and Hope." Schreiter is a theology prof in Chicago (Catholic Theological Union), a major Roman Catholic voice in today's missiology. At least half a dozen of his books are on ORBIS's current list. One carries the title "The Ministry of Reconciliation." That has been Bob's outside-the-classroom

“real-world” work now for many years. He’s regularly on-the-road to major troubled spots in the world to practice just that ministry. The ORBIS book editor sent me the new reissue as a freebee. Doubtless there’s a message there. So I read it a few days ago. Reconciliation is a central theme here too. But it left me unhappy. So I now must read his “Ministry of Reconciliation” book to get his full blueprint. Bob presents reconciliation in the same format as surfaces in the IAMS PR for next year’s gathering.

In both cases the gospel of reconciliation comes out “too small” when compared with the Biblical original. The gist of my complaint is that the major focus for Christian mission is human-to-human reconciliation—expressed in nickel works, getting conflicting folks to stop fighting and be nice to one another. In Schreiter’s constant mantra, God’s reconciliation project is God, Christ, and now Christ’s people “staying in solidarity and hope with those who suffer . . . who struggle for a better world.” The gospel of reconciliation is God’s own “peace and justice” agenda for the world.

Though never denied, the reality of a planet-wide humanity still UN-reconciled to God never surfaces for serious attention, as though since Christ’s cross and resurrection it’s a done deal—even if multitudes around the globe (also inside the churches!) don’t trust it. The conclusion is: so now let’s get busy with intra-human reconciliation, with undoing the daily news headlines of worldwide mayhem and madness. That’s the only part of God’s reconciliation project not yet complete. In language you’ve seen before in these posts, all the attention, the hype, is on reconciliation coram hominibus (the human-to-human interface) and reconciliation coram deo (the God-and-us interface) at best gets briefly mentioned, but then bypassed in favor of the former.

A while back when the IAMS assembly info arrived, I waved my flag complaining about this to our IAMS executive secretary. a dear guy in Holland. When I read Bob Schreiter's book I saw the parallels. Namely, that THE gospel of reconciliation was getting short shrift. In Bob's book he uses specific Biblical texts to anchor each chapter. But these Biblical anchors always wind up mooring his case for reconciliation coram hominibus, and only now and then do we hear—sometimes only in allusions—of the coram deo agenda. And never that getting folks reconciled to God is STILL the center of Christian mission. But I'll hold my peace for now until I read his "Ministry of Reconciliation" volume. Since the title itself comes right out of St. Paul's magna charta for coram-deo reconciliation (2 Cor. 5), that may silence my caveats.

I did respond to the IAMS assembly promo piece when it came. So for this ThTh posting here are some thoughts on the topic.

Something like this is what I sent to the IAMS office:

*To the program committee:*

*This weekend I spent some time with a closer reading of what's come from the IAMS office re: our next year's gathering in Hungary. I was surprised (I hadn't noticed it in previous readings) that although the GOSPEL OF RECONCILIATION is 50% of the conference theme (Human Identity and the Gospel of Reconciliation) there's no reference to it in any of the subsequent prose, nor in the call for papers. Is it taken as an "of course" that "everyone" knows what the Gospel of Reconciliation is and thus no direct attention to that topic is needed? I know that you know that that is not true. Or is it that that topic is too much a conflictive "hot potato" in our diverse ecumenical group, and so we would do well not to address it directly?*

*It is surprising to me that, even though “the Gospel of reconciliation” is one center of the conference-theme ellipse (Human Identity and Gospel of Reconciliation), the NT text chosen by the conference committee to focus it never once mentions the word reconciliation. And there are classic NT texts where that term is the focus –both for what reconciliation means and for its consequences for Human Identity.*

*You doubtless know the prose for the upcoming conference by heart, but I’ll just copy some of it (from the website) to pinpoint what I’m talking about.*

*Human Identity and the Gospel of Reconciliation: Agenda for Mission Studies and Praxis in the 21st Century*

*26 for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. 27 As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. 28 There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. 29 And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s offspring, - heirs according to the promise. (Galatians 3:26-29, NRSV)*

*[Significant by its “real absence” is any reference to reconciliation in that Galatians text.]*

*The descriptive material in the announcement prompts these thoughts:*

*“. . . Christian faith finds its fundamental identity in a gospel of reconciliation.”*

*[Right. So first let’s ask: Just what does “gospel of reconciliation” mean in NT usage? Why is it allegedly Good News? What’s the “Bad News” that it supplants? Etc. And then*

*why not review in subsequent church/mission history the variety of views of reconciliation—even conflicting views— that have come since those NT times? I know that you know, for example, that the 16th century Reformation/Counter-reformation was at root also a debate about just what is the Gospel of Reconciliation. Why not put these cards on the table?*

*The variety of understandings of reconciliation will surface willy-nilly as we gather next year and get to discussing the second center of the conference ellipse: Human Identity. That's a given, as you too know from past IAMS gatherings. And therefore the following prose about the conference on the website comes off sounding unreal—almost platitudinous.]*

*“What is the relationship between the different, even conflicting, human identities and the gospel of reconciliation?*

*[The conflicting opinions arise already in how we read the “gospel of reconciliation.” Why not speak to that topic? Shouldn't we take a close look at the “horse” before we examine the “cart”?]*

*“Is there a human identity that supersedes all specific identities-national, religious, gender, and/or economic, etc.? How can apparently conflicting identities be reconciled?”*

*[That is NOT the primary conflict that the Gospel of Reconciliation addresses. The NT reconciliation Gospel centers in the “coram deo” conflict, not the “coram hominibus” conflict. The two are connected, of course—one the malady, the other the consequences, the symptoms, the signals, thereof. The NT axiom is: If the coram deo reconciliation agenda is ignored, any coram hominibus efforts are analogous to re-arranging deckchairs on the Titanic.]*

*“How can one achieve a wholesome self-identity that includes*

*the possibility of change and transformative mobility?"*

*["Wholesome" self-identity is never the goal of NT reconciliation, is it? Wouldn't "cruciform" identity be more grounded in THE gospel of reconciliation? Or even the flip-side of that, "Easter people identity?" "Wholesome" sounds too much like current pc therapeutic rhetoric. Some of the other terms in that sentence are what in US slang is called "boilerplate." The identity, the change, the transformation, offered by THE Gospel of reconciliation is Good-Friday-and-Easter in its format. Calling that "wholesome" (or transformative, or abetting mobility) seems to trivialize the radical NEW identity that comes with THE Gospel of Reconciliation. At the simplest level the Gospel of Reconciliation changes human identity. It bestows the identity of being God's children when once we were God's enemies.*

*"And what is the role of reconciliation as offered by the Gospel to the Christian community and by the Christian community?"*

*[If we don't specify early on in the conference that the NT Gospel of reconciliation is a coram deo agenda item, God's gift in Christ (but nowhere else that we know of) to a God-hostile humankind, then we'll be confused at best about what's offered TO as well as BY the Christian community. If the conf. committee had chosen one of the primary Reconciliation texts in the NT, e.g., 2 Cor 5, we'd at least have initial "easy" answers to get started on those "TO" and "BY" questions. Coram deo God in Christ is reconciling sinners to himself. That's the TO. That's God's offer TO the whole human race—churchly or non-churchly—in Christ.*

*The "offered BY" element is what Paul in that same 2 Corinthians 5 text calls the ministry of reconciliation, the*

ambassador's assignment "God making his appeal through us." After the initial indicative sentence ("God was in Christ reconciling the world unto himself") comes the ambassadorial imperative: "Therefore be reconciled to God . . . so that in Christ we/you might become the very righteousness of God."]

"The 12th assembly of IAMS will bring together scholars of different disciplines who will share their research and their evaluation with respect to such questions. It is hoped that a fruitful cross-fertilization can be realized that might stimulate further missiological research and set an agenda for future studies and ongoing praxis. It is also hoped that churches and other religious institutions might gain fresh insights from this assembly for their day-to-day work in a world where conflicting identities seem to subvert reconciliation efforts."

[It's clear that here (and elsewhere in the conference information) "reconciliation" is seen exclusively in coram hominibus contours, the human-to-human interface, and not the God-human interface. Surely, the conf. planners don't see the coram deo agenda as irrelevant? Why then no specific attention to it? Too hot to handle? Surely, IAMS by now, in our 12th gathering, is "old enough" to be able to talk-shop about that, aren't we?]

"The goal of the Budapest Assembly will be to identify and explore ethnic, gender, political, and religious dimensions of human identity as challenge, opportunity, and obligation for Christian churches in mission, from the vantage point of scholars whose academic disciplines intersect with mission studies. Papers from across a range of intersecting or vitally related themes-such as ethnicity, race, gender, violence, poverty, nationalism, religion, ecclesiastical tradition, inner renewal, etc.-will be welcomed."

*[Why not call for papers—even better call for plenary speakers—to address Coram Deo reconciliation? And ask these speakers to ring the changes on how THIS or THAT understanding of Reconciliation shapes Human Identity? For years—at IAMS meetings for several decades and USA annual meetings of the ASM—this has been the constant subterranean debate-topic, but it never gets on the official program: Just what is THE Gospel of reconciliation, and what does it mean for Mission? Why not do it this time at the 12th assembly?]*

*Summa:*

*Dear conference planners,*

*For IAMS XII*

*Don't get us participants so focused on coram hominibus reconciliation that THE Gospel of Reconciliation (coram deo) falls by the wayside. In all the "sending/mission" mandates of the NT—Mark 16:15, Matt. 28:18ff., John 20:21, Luke 24:27—reconciliation coram deo is the clear assignment, not coram hominibus. When the former takes hold, the latter follows. When the former is ignored or "taken for granted," the latter will never happen. Should our gathering, God forbid, spend all our time on the latter and ignore the former, it will be an exercise in futility. The "New" in human identity is that Christ-connected sinners are reconciled to God. Their prior identity is "NOT reconciled to God." Or in the language cited above from 2 Cor. 5, the clean contrary indentities are "becoming the righteousness of God"—as hyperbolic as that sounds—and not having such righteousness to identify with. The difference between these two alternate God-connections qualifies all the other manifold identities in the human community.*

*Peace and Joy!*

*Ed Schroeder*

*St. Louis, Missouri USA*



P.S. To tip my hand a bit:

Luther's exegesis of 2 Cor 5 articulates "Gospel of reconciliation" as Christ's "fröhlicher Wechsel"—"sweet swap" in American slang—with sinners. The One "who knew no sin" takes our sin as though it were his own ("becomes sin for us") and—mirabile dictu—in the exchange sinners get Christ's righteousness, "become (gulp!) the righteousness of God." What a deal! What a sweet swap! "Reconciliation" is understood here not as two enemies becoming friends again, but in the marketplace sense of the term—balancing the books, "reconciling" accounts. The "froehlich" element here is that the debits of sinners are cheerfully assumed by Him who had no such debits, and his credits get offered in exchange to us who have no such credits (surely not with the deity) on our own.

The consequences of this sweet swap for human identity are manifold. One of ML's favorite ways for spelling that out was in the multiple callings—call them "identities"—that every human has by virtue of the individual historical context where God has placed us. Luther was fascinated by one of the NT's favorite terms for Christian identity, namely, "freedom." He articulated that "reconciliation-freedom" into the manifold daily individual identities each person has in family, gender, nation, vocation, social location, education, citizen, etc.

In today's world where human identities everywhere are impacted (yes, imperiled) by global economy and market forces, Luther's marketplace metaphors for the Gospel of reconciliation and the "freedom" spin-offs for daily-life identities are too good to be ignored.

But I'd better stop. That's already the 250-word abstract asked for in the "call for papers." I may just send it to the IAMS headquarters as my proposal for next year's get-together.

Peace and Joy!  
Ed Schroeder

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# Deaconess Evelyn Middelstadt, R.I.P.

Colleagues,

Deaconess Evelyn Middelstadt was murdered in Wichita, Kansas, last week. Evelyn and I were classmates at Valparaiso University 60 yrs ago and have been friends ever since. We've bumped into each other sporadically during those 6 decades at church gatherings, Lutheran Deaconess events and Valpo homecomings.

At age 79 she's been officially "retired" – a couple of times, I think. She was following her diaconal calling yet once more when the client she was helping apparently killed her. The only info I have is from postings that two of Evelyn's deaconess sisters have sent to me.

Here is one of them from a Wichita newspaper:

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## **Victim may have tried to help her killer** **BY STAN FINGER** **The Wichita Eagle**

The man suspected of killing a beloved retired social worker had spent much of his four months of employment wheedling her for money, the man's boss said Thursday.

On the day authorities say 79-year-old Evelyn Middelstadt was killed, the man had been told that not only would he not be given a remodeling job he wanted, he owed the company back rent and advances on his wages.

"I'm just guessing that when he was with Evelyn, he was so upset... he got into this argument and he lost control," said Moses Thompson, president of Minority Contractors & Consultants Inc. at 507 N. Volutsia, where Middelstadt worked as an assistant manager.

She was found dead at the company's office Wednesday morning (Aug. 1), and a 47-year-old employee was arrested that afternoon at Thompson's house in Park City after being brought from Oklahoma by his uncle at Thompson's request.

The man had driven to his uncle's house near Stillwater in Middelstadt's white 1996 Buick Century, said Lt. Ken Landwehr of the Wichita Police Department's homicide unit. Authorities believe Middelstadt was killed Tuesday afternoon, though they were awaiting the results of a Thursday autopsy to find out how.

Charges are expected to be filed today.

Middelstadt had worked at Minority Contractors & Consultants for 12 years after a career in social work that friends say achieved legendary status.

People around Wichita "have no idea how known she is around the nation," said the Rev. Allen Hoger, pastor of Immanuel Lutheran Church, 909 S. Market, where Middelstadt worshipped. "There are people from coast to coast grieving with us." [Hoger is a Seminex grad ('78) AND an LCMS pastor!]

Thompson said he had urged Middelstadt early this week to stop giving the suspect money when he pressured her for it. He needed

it for food, he would say. Or gasoline for his van.

Middelstadt had a hard time saying “no,” Thompson said, and she would give the man rides when he had someplace to go.

Within minutes of learning about Middelstadt’s death shortly after 9 a.m. Wednesday, Thompson said, he got a call from the suspect’s uncle in Oklahoma saying the man had shown up unexpectedly in a car.

Police initially thought Middelstadt’s fatal injuries may have been the result of a fall, Thompson said, until he told them about her missing car and cell phone.

As Thompson was at City Hall answering questions for police, he said, the suspect’s uncle called him and asked what was going on.

Thompson convinced the man to bring his nephew back to Wichita. When Thompson learned they had arrived at his house in Park City, he called 911.

The suspect was arrested without incident.

The mood was somber Thursday at the Self-Help Network of Kansas, which Middelstadt created at the kitchen table of her modest home in 1984.

“We’re really saddened,” said Julie Underwood, the network’s communications coordinator.

One of her first duties when she went to work for the network a few months ago, Underwood said, was to read what has become known as “the kitchen table story,” which tells of the network’s roots and Middelstadt’s role in its creation.

It’s displayed on an easel for visitors to see.

"I was really touched when I read it," Underwood said. "She had a vision. Her vision was grand."

Hoger, the minister, said he was not surprised that the man suspected of killing Middelstadt was someone she was helping. "It's just very sad. Here is somebody they had tried to help, and what a waste it was – both of her life, and now, of course, of his."

As he reflected on Middelstadt's death, Hoger said, he thought of the soldiers who hit the beaches on D-Day. They knew they were doing something dangerous, but that didn't stop them. "Evelyn didn't want to be killed," he said, "but she did want to do work in which she knew she was in danger."

Because she knew what could happen, Hoger said, her fearlessness wasn't naivete. "It was tragic what happened... but it was also a very holy thing. It was an act of love," he said. "God is going to speak to this community through her death, even as he did through her life."

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### [EHS again]

Evelyn and I were classmates in the late 1940s as Valparaiso University undergrads, she on the deaconess track, me on pre-seminary. My "official" connection with the Lutheran Deaconess Association began a decade later, and once more it was at V.U. When I started teaching there in 1957, the biggest bunch of students taking a theology major were students in the LDA program. So they were always in my classes, and often the majority in upper division courses. That classroom connection lasted for 14 years. Toward the end of that time I got nudged into the department chairmanship, and that made me academic advisor for all deaconess students and put me (ex officio) on

the LDA board. And after that V.U. adventure came to closure in 1971 Marie and I have continued as supporters of the LDA cause year in and year out.

The LDA is a strange and wonderful outfit. It arose within the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod in the early part of the last century, 1919 to be exact, but like many similar movements/causes in Missouri it was "in and with," but not "under" the LCMS. Often generated by lay initiatives these initiatives were loyal to Missouri, but ran their own show. Here's a list of such organizations—the ones I can remember—that arose within Missouri back in those days—Lutheran Laymen's League, Lutheran Women's Missionary League, Walther League (the LCMS youth movement), Lutheran Human Relations Assn, the Liturgical Institute—even Valparaiso University itself back in 1925. All of them working "in and with" the LCMS, but not "under." Consequently some of these movements morphed into becoming "pan-Lutheran." Classical case is the LDA.

LDA deaconesses work both sides of the Lutheran denominational divide in the US (LCMS and ELCA) and in Canada (ELCIC and LCC). And they are engaged in diaconal ministries not only here "up north." One of our own Schroeder clan, my sister's daughter Heidi Michelsen, is LDA veteran in service with the marginalized in San Jose, Costa Rica.

But these LDA sisters are even more ecumenical than that. In recent years they have played a significant role in world-wide diaconal conversations. For example, LDA exec, Dr. Louise Williams, is currently president of DIAKONIA, the international association of diaconal ministries around the world.

Now back to Evelyn. I spoke with her pastor Allen Hoyer this Thursday morning about the funeral day before yesterday in Witchita. Eighteen deaconess sisters from around the country

assembled as the choir for the liturgy. I asked Allen for a copy of his homily. He cyber-wired it to me. I'll paste it here below for your edification.

Peace and joy!

Ed Schroeder.

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## **SERMON**

### **Text: Mark 10:32-45**

The life of Christ is a journey to the Third Day. The Father has aimed his Son's life in the direction of the cross, to take it up for the life of the world, to suffer abuse and brutal death, but in the end to rise from death. We learn from early childhood never to call the death of Jesus a tragedy. We learn from our cradles that was the Father's will, and that our Lord himself knew and accepted it. We even call the day of his crucifixion Good Friday – "Good" because God is good, Jesus was goodness itself in human flesh; and good because his death was so good for us. It made the grave itself the gateway to heaven for all who believe.

The journey for every disciple is also a journey to the Third Day, the Last Day, the Day of Resurrection. It, too, must go the way of the cross; there is no way to the Resurrection except through the cross. The Kingdom of God must be entered – as Paul in Acts tells a congregation of new Christians – by way of many afflictions. But what does this mean? No one knows except God.

James and John were brothers in that order: first James, then younger brother. Both were called on the same day, both left their nets and followed at the same time. And, as time went on, both got hungry, the way we get hungry. Hungry for recognition and glory. Hungry to bask in the glow of Jesus. Hungry for their

dreams to be fulfilled, to find fulfilment. Hungry to reach that day of looking back and saying proudly, "Yes, we were with him from the beginning. We were always at his side, and that's why we're here, seated with him today at the banquet of his glory."

They did not know. God only knew. God is the only one who ever knows. John lived long – incredibly long for those days. James was the first Apostle to be killed. John became the bishop of Ephesus, James never made it out of Jerusalem. John died of natural causes, James lost his head at the hands of the Herod. Evelyn did both – lived long in service, and died a brutal death, When they were called they looked just alike. On that impatient day of their foolish request, they sounded just alike. But each one receives his own calling from God, each her road through the cross to the resurrection. And nobody knows what the road will be. God only knows.

But we also know this: That if we have been redeemed by the Righteousness of God, we are committed to the Righteousness of God. Since our Master came that the world may have life, we are called to work for the life of the world. And just as his road meant doing good, healing the sick, and proclaiming the Kingdom, so does ours. Although each one's calling is different, there is in another sense only one calling that we all share. Every follower of the Messiah is called to believe in Him and the One who sent him, and to bear witness with their mouths and in their lives. This witness always includes, among other things, praying for one's enemies, and endeavoring to overcome evil with good.

To live by faith, in other words, to follow Christ to the Resurrection, is to live a life of love. If your Lord is a man whose arms stretched out on the cross, then you will desire in your heart life for everyone you meet. You will desire that person not to perish, no matter who they are; and you will desire good for them in their days on earth. A godly heart is



not just a heart that believes, but always a heart that loves. And a heart that loves asks itself this, "How can I be an instrument in the hand of God for the sake of another?"

By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. But he, seeking to justify himself, asked, "But who is my neighbor?"

Evelyn Middelstadt received from God – not all at once, but over many years and through various failures and difficulties – the new heart for which we always pray in Psalm 51, the Communion offertory: Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me.

It did not come naturally to her. At her birth she was constituted no different from James and John at the height of their sad, silly ambition. She, too, was born with the seed of wanting glory, wanting to be served. But early on, already in her own family, the Spirit who came in her Baptism did not depart from her, but began and continued to shape her in the image of God's Son. And this good work by her Lord, begun and continued in Evelyn, was ended last week.

Not "interrupted," not "stopped." Don't say "brought to a halt" or "wrecked." But "ended, finished, completed." As we often pray from Philippians in the liturgy: May God, who has begun this good work in us, bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.

Evelyn died facing great evil. She died at the hands of someone whose life was in the grip of great evil. But as a disciple she understood that in this fallen world one cannot help others without confronting evil. She also knew full well that the same sin which drives anyone to evil was in her. She had in her heart the sin of Eve, the sin of Cain, the sin of us all. She knew that the only difference between her and her killer was the

grace of God that had converted her heart and come to govern her life.

Martin Luther would write in the maturity of his career that one of the distinguishing marks of the Church was her afflictions. Yes, the truly defining marks of the Church are the pure Gospel of Christ in proclamation and absolution, the offering of Baptism in God's name, and the Holy Supper of Christ. But because the Gospel and its sacraments are always offered in a fallen world that is full of evil, the Church on earth shall always be, said Luther, a suffering Church.

This truth pertains, then, not only to the pastoral ministry of faith, but equally to the diaconal ministry of love. It is not just Apostles but also deacons who receive martyrdom in its many forms. Satan seeks to halt, not just the proclamation of repentance and the forgiveness of sins, but equally the deeds of love that accompany the Word. For he knows how empty the proclamation becomes when carried out by those who do not love, and how the deeds of love have a witnessing power all their own. So, he hates faithful deaconesses just as much as he hates faithful preachers.

But just as the Word can never be stopped – Satan cannot because one little Word can fell him – neither can the lives of love that it creates and sends into the world. The Lord of the Church always uses both the lives and the deaths of his servants to proclaim his glory. Tertullian was right: the blood of the martyrs is always seed. May much grow from the sad and ugly – but also glorious and blessed – event of last week. May many follow Evelyn, even as she has followed Christ – which is always through the cross, to the Resurrection.

Allen C Hoger, Pastor  
Immanuel Lutheran Church

Wichita, Kansas  
August 7, 2007

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## FOUR WEEKS IN WESTERN CANADA

Colleagues,

Sabbatheology text studies come in the matrix of the Crossings paradigm—3 diagnostic steps, 3 prognostic steps. So you readers know something in advance of what you're getting each week. Not so with ThTh. There's never been a paradigm, let alone a mission-statement, to norm these Thursday postings. Consequently EHS whimsy—yes, and sometimes dyspepsia—has had its day for almost a decade of ThTh postings and the Crossings board lets me get away with it.

So here comes one that may sound like opening school day in second grade.

“What I did on my vacation this summer.”

### FOUR WEEKS IN WESTERN CANADA

That means four Sundays in Western Canada, the last four of the month just passed. For the first two—in Vancouver, British Columbia and Jasper, Alberta—I was asked to be the homilist in Lutheran congregations of the ELCIC (Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada)—the “liberal” Lutherans, friendly to my own US denomination ELCA. In both congregations former seminary students of mine are the resident pastors—Richard Hergesheimer and Doug Heine. They said they welcomed turning the tables on their old prof when it came to giving assignments and hearing

recitations.

Third Sunday Marie and I sat in the pew with an LC-C (Lutheran Church-Canada) congregation—allegedly more conservative in Canadian contexts and friendly with the Missouri Synod in the USA. Here too the pastor, Marvin Ziprick, is a former student. His congregation is on its way to being a mega-church in a booming suburb of Edmonton. Big new building, theater-style sanctuary, all worship texts projected on mega-screens, pastor in shirt-sleeves, the altar not used for worship-focus, and sadly not much gospel in the allegedly “gospel” songs we sang. It seemed that the pastor’s homily sought to counteract that. Even so, I wondered if he noticed the dissonance.

Fourth Sunday was in Prince Albert, Saskatchewan. We went Anglican. Reason was that our host Michael Averyt, Seminex grad, Werner Elert buff (he read Elert’s dogmatics—in German!—before he got to the seminary) and all that, is now Archdeacon at St. Alban’s cathedral there. The dean of the cathedral, celebrant and homilist for the day, reads ThTh. Our knee-bones got flexed according to Book of Common Prayer rubrics at the early mass.

On one of the Sundays when it was my turn to preach (Pentecost VII), the Gospel for the day was the Good Samaritan parable (Luke 10:25-37). There are 3 studies on the Crossings website for that text, where Jesus responds to the question “Who is my neighbor?” Two of those three studies take the “standard” pattern of attending to the neighbor question itself, focusing the diagnosis/prognosis there. Ignoring the neighbor is the malady being diagnosed. The priest and the Levite who “pass by on the other side” when they see the victim (=neighbor) “half-dead” in the ditch are the bad guys who get diagnosed. [And who of us is immune to the same analysis?] Solution is to move us “priests and Levites” to encounter THE Good Samaritan, Christ crucified and risen, be healed by his ministrations and then “go

and do likewise” as compassionate Samaritans on the Jerusalem-to-Jericho highways of our lives.

Not bad. But is that what Luke wants us to hear? The third text study archived on the Crossings website by Ron Starenko doesn’t think so.

Right off the bat Ron tells us that the lawyer who posed the question is the guy in the ditch “who ‘fell into the hands of robbers’ (v. 30), left half-dead.” He is the victim and the law, God’s own law, is the robber who has put him there. The lawyer needs THE Good Samaritan, not to answer his law-book questions, but to rescue him from being half-dead, before total rigor mortis sets in.

Well, that caught my attention, so I snooped around Luke’s Gospel more closely.

First question: Is Luke really THAT “Lutheran?” The law as killer? Self-justification the mortal sin? God’s mercy-Messiah the only solution? Even salvation by faith alone—by trusting (receiving) the merits and benefits of that mercy Messiah? Maybe so.

1. Law vs. compassion in the pericope sounds like law vs. Gospel.
2. Works-righteousness is the central “sin” in classic parables that are found only in Luke: The Pharisee and Tax-Collector, the Elder Brother in the Prodigal Son parable, and then this one where the neighbor-question comes from one seeking to “justify himself.” Thus such folks conclude that they don’t “need repentance”—or forgiveness—since they have no sins to be forgiven.
3. Those very words, “repentance and the forgiveness of sins,” are specified in Luke’s “great commission” statement at the end of his Gospel as Christ’s assignment

“to be proclaimed in his name to all the nations.”

Whether or not it's Lutheran, it is Lukan. So now back to the text of Luke 10:25-37.

Consider this. In Luke's Gospel, every time he uses the Greek term “nomikos” (from the root-term “nomos” = law) it is in a conflict situation with Jesus. English translations regularly render nomikos as “lawyer” as in this Luke 10 text. The adversarial situation often comes in a “Woe to you lawyers!” from Jesus, which suggests a different, yes, better, translation for this Greek term. For the NT Gospels never present Jesus as fundamentally in conflict with a person's skill or professional competence—even tax-collectors! So just because a person has a law degree, even a degree in God's law, that by itself wouldn't render him culpable. The conflict comes with how that skill and competence is used.

Seems to me therefore that we ought to translate “nomikos” not as “lawyer,” but as “legalist.” It's a theological term, not a job-description. Take a look at the places where “nomikos” shows up in Luke and read “legalist” instead of “lawyer.” For it is the legalists who “reject God's purpose for them” (Luke 7:30), who “test” Jesus and “want to justify themselves” (10:25.29), who “load people with burdens hard to bear” and trigger Jesus' “Woe!” (11:45, 46, 52), and who are finally rendered speechless when Jesus “heals on the Sabbath,” thus breaking the law and yet doing God's saving work (14:3).

So it is not the law degree of the nomikos that puts him in opposition to Jesus, it's his theology. I confess that I've preached this parable “wrong” in the past. So this time when asked to be guest preacher, I sought to do it “right.”

Wrong is to treat the parable as though Jesus really intends to answer the nomikos's question, “who is my neighbor?”. If for no

other reason than this: When did Jesus ever give a “straight” answer to any of his challengers? And in this text Luke gives us big clues. Nomikos wants to know what he must “do” to “inherit” eternal life. And if we missed that one in the opening verses of the text, Luke makes it perfectly clear when the “who is my neighbor” question comes. The nomikos is not asking for information, he’s “seeking to justify himself.”

So THAT’S the problem Jesus addresses in this nomikos, not his request for a dictionary definition of “neighbor.” He’s a legal-IST. But he doesn’t know that until Jesus does his diagnostic probe on the man. The parable is not at all Jesus answering his apparently innocent question. We see that in the “twist” at the parable’s end, the pun with the word neighbor. Nomikos needs SOMEONE to neighbor him, someone to have compassion on him before he slides into total rigor mortis in his own legalist ditch.

### **So Step One:**

*The legalist bug still bugs us too. Doing in order to inherit. Justifying selves. Even in “loving neighbors” by adding an “incurvature back into self” which morphs neighbor-love into self-love. Even worse, doing so—as does the nomikos in the text—when we are actually face-to-face with THE Good Samaritan himself.***Step Two**

*Which renders us commandment-breakers of the very first commandment, for the business of justifying human beings is God’s exclusive domain, the Regime of God. No usurpation allowed. The two “great” commandments are Siamese twins. Break one and you’ve broken the other.*

### **Step Three**

*Already half-dead, with full rigor mortis to come. Even if he thinks all his vital signs are OK, the nomikos has been robbed of life by that very legalist regime. Two agents of God’s law*

come by—priest and Levite—but they cannot help him. They are actually more of the “bad doctors” who have left him at death’s door.

Using God’s law for self-salvation turns God’s law into our accuser. Teasing us into trusting it as our way to save ourselves, the law robs us of the life we sought to gain by it. Half-dead already, total death up ahead. Needed is a Good Samaritan, an agent of God’s compassion, healing.

### **Step Four**

The Good Samaritan as our neighbor. Enter the outsider, a despised outsider, the Samaritan. And you know who he is in real life. He’s the one talking to the legalist. Often in the NT Gospels Jesus gets tarred with this dirty word “Samaritan!” The negative signals of that term reach their finale on Good Friday. The “Good” of Good Friday and the “Good” of the Good Samaritan are one and the same.

Jesus points to that at the end of the parable with his “twist” on the word neighbor. He doesn’t ask the nomikos “so who is the neighbor to be loved in this story?” Instead he makes neighbor the subject of the verb “love,” not the object: “Who played the role of neighbor to that victim?” The old legalist answers: “The good guy, he was neighbor.” Jesus’ rejoinder: “Ok, that’s the answer to your initial question: Who is my neighbor? The neighbor that you REALLY NEED is the compassionate Good Samaritan—the very person talking with you. So that’s the neighbor for you to love.” However, before we love him as neighbor, he exercises neighbor-love to us. Big time. Then and now.

Comes again—this Pentecost VII Sunday—God’s Good Samaritan, God’s mothering compassion, God’s Christ of the cross and Easter in proclamation and in sacrament. Once again the offer



*of Christ's mercy-exchange. His life for our death. Transporting us to the house of healing—and then after getting us victims to the hostel, Christ pledges to keep on supplying whatever resources are needed to get us legalists completely "healed" as our Samaritan-rescuer keeps coming down that road again and again.*

### **Step Five**

*"Go and do likewise – phase one." Let Christ "be neighbor" to you, be YOUR Good Samaritan. Call it faith. Trust his offer in place of the law-trusting, self-justifying routines that are so tempting. Even more intimate and personal: "Trust me," Christ says, "Hang your heart on me. For in trusting me you are loving me as neighbor. And in doing so you are at the same time trusting/loving the Father." Faith fulfills both of the big commandments—love God, love the neighbor—in one fell swoop.*

### **Step Six**

*"Go and do likewise – phase two." Offer the Good Samaritan to all the legalists in your neighborhood, beginning right at home with the legalists you know the best—and who know best your own legalism. Who of your neighbors hasn't been "ditched" by the law—either in their law-keeping or their law-breaking? They are the candidates for your "Go and do likewise—phase two."*

Pentecost VII's second Scripture reading (Colossians 1:1-14) bubbles with specifics:

"filled with the knowledge of God's will" = What do we know about what God wants? God wants all legalists rescued by his Good Samaritan Son and has designated us agents to spread the word.

"lead lives worthy of the Lord" = lives marked with the "worth" of Christ's compassion passed on to every ditched victim we

encounter. And their name is legion.

“be prepared to endure everything with patience” = it won’t be a piece of cake, but the constant-care supplier has pledged to keep on keeping on with us.

“giving thanks to the Father who has enabled us to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light.” Did you get that? Not at all do we “do” to “inherit,” but the one Jesus called Father has taken care of that agenda for us.

And then the cornerstone of it all: “He has rescued us from the power of darkness (=self-justification by our doings) and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son (=the regime of the Good Samaritan’s compassion), in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.”

For the nomikos in all of us, that is Good and that is New. Good News indeed!

Peace and joy!

Ed Schroeder

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**Review of John H. Tietjen’s  
The Gospel According to Jesus.  
(St. Louis: Creative  
Communications for the Parish,**

## 2006), 83 pp.

To write a first-person account of the life of Jesus, when that voice is Jesus' own, is a daunting task, rarely undertaken. Even efforts, which have presumed to come close, such as Dostoevsky's *The Grand Inquisitor* or Kazantzakis' *Last Temptation of Christ* or *The Greek Passion*, did not quite manage to get into Jesus' skin to tell the story. Such a work would have to be incredibly reckless or unbelievably faithful. John Tietjen's little volume, *The Gospel According to Jesus*, falls quite clearly into the latter. Published posthumously, it is the author's gift of love and rare insight to the church and, hopefully, beyond.

John Tietjen, of course, is a name, which many in Lutheran circles will recognize, most notably for participating in a period of history that was both painful and yet enormously creative. One will have to check other sources for the account of John Tietjen's life and the controversy in which he found himself embroiled but to many of us Tietjen will forever be remembered and esteemed as a man of faithful, pristine integrity. I am one of those who wore the black T-shirt with pride and which read, "No learnin' without Tietjen." I can speak for most Seminexers whose short list for his/her most influential voices will most certainly include the name John H. Tietjen.

To have known Dr. Tietjen then is to recognize the gift he left the church in his little book, *The Gospel According to Jesus*. In many ways it is a treasure. Of the very few whom I would trust to write a first-person account of the life of Jesus would be this author about whom I would not hesitate to apply the Beatitude (and, no doubt, to the profound embarrassment of the now-sainted writer), "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they

shall see God.”

I want to say that this is the kind of book someone would write about Jesus if they have seen God.

1. With Simple Prose, A Divinely Human JesusThe book begins its narrative with Mary of Bethany, Lazarus’ and Martha’s sister. Mary has found a small bundle, containing a scroll written in Jesus’ own hand, offering “the life of Master Jesus in his own words” (p. 4).The next eighteen chapters reveal the contents of the scroll. The chapters are written in simple, clear prose and unveil a Jesus who is human, questioning who he is and what the purpose of his life is all about. The reader will quickly find himself relating to the questions and concerns Jesus has because they are of the kind which any person of faith, and even those without such trust, would have. This is as the author intended. “I put Jesus in my shoes, and the story took off” (p. 1). Yet, with characteristic modesty, Tietjen adds, “I have no illusion that I can know what Jesus thought or felt. But the New Testament affirms that Jesus was in every respect (except without sin) a human being as I am. I can put Jesus in my shoes because he has already walked in them” (p. 1).

For Tietjen, however, the goal is something far larger than to present a Jesus who can identify with me. “I am emboldened to tell the Gospel story as I have because, in fact, each Christian life is a Gospel according to Jesus. All Christians walk in Jesus’ steps and live out Jesus’ life in their own” (p. 2). No doubt, the author took his cue in part from a common mentor, Martin Luther, who referred to the Christian as a “little Christ” (Christlein) and makes such boldness, as is this account, possible.

The book then, more or less, follows loosely a chronology of Jesus' life, such as one could piece together by the four Gospels. What is striking in Tietjen's approach is that while, true enough, Tietjen's Jesus recounts with increasing clarity Jesus' mission, Tietjen uses the Gospel accounts as they were truly intended: less as histories than as proclamation stories. As Jesus struggles with who he is, while trusting the direction of God, each episode brings new insight for Jesus and clarification of Jesus' calling. Jesus struggles with the Law and its claims, for instance, but always with a view of learning about the promised Son of David and the reign of God that will come through him (p. 13). Jesus is also struck deeply by the figure of the Suffering Servant of Isaiah and how "suffering for the transgressions of the people is to be the work of God's servant" (p. 14). Jesus further tries to make sense out of his encounter with his cousin John and ends up concluding "his (John the Baptist's) call to repentance is too harsh" (p. 18) and that Jesus would have people, instead, "hear the good news in the invitation to return to God and to righteousness" (p. 18). Jesus says, "He (John) demanded. I would invite" (p. 19).

2. The Reign of God If there is a common thread to Tietjen's Jesus and his story, consistent with the Synoptic Gospels, it is the essential theme of the kingdom of God or, as Tietjen's Jesus would have it, "the reign of God." Jesus comes to usher in the reign of God. As students of the Gospels know, the term constitutes something essential about the gospel, the good news about how life changes with the invitation to trust the reign of God, but with the Synoptic Gospels, there are many blanks to fill in. What does the reign of God entail? What does it mean? What is so good about the good news of that rule? The question

is urgent, especially nowadays, when the essentials of the reign of God are taken to have something to do with a fallen world realizing justice and peace as good news. Indeed, Tietjen's Jesus, as Jesus begins the Sermon on the Mount, says, "I want the people to understand the differences between the way of the world and the reign of God" (p. 28). In explanation of the differences, Tietjen's Jesus then proclaims (in paraphrasing the Beatitudes):

*"You are blessed when all your ambitious plans don't work. With less of you there is more room for the reign of God in your life. You are blessed when you have lost the person dearest to you. Then you can feel the embrace of the One who holds you most dear. You are blessed when you find yourself owning nothing. Then you will discover the value of all those things that can never be bought. You are blessed when you find yourself hungry and thirsty for goodness. Then you are ready for the best meal God gives anyone." "I want the people to see how different life would be for them under the reign of God. "You are blessed when you must spend your life caring for others. In the midst of your caring you will discover how God cares for you...You are blessed when your heart is at peace with God. That's when you begin to see God in the world around you. You are blessed when you show people a better way than fighting all the time. You are sure to find your place in God's family." And then perhaps the most difficult lesson of all, "You are blessed when your work for God causes people to exclude you or even hate you. Their abuse of you strengthens God's reign in your life" (p. 28).*

It is interesting that Tietjen's Jesus articulates how promising faith hears such words and makes sense out of them, not as demand (as have often been the case with the

Beatitudes) but as promise. Given the history of how the Beatitudes have been otherwise heard (such as the “evangelical counsels” of the medieval church...or, as “law”), Tietjen’s Jesus would have us hear them again as promise.

As Jesus develops the theme of the kingdom or reign of God further, Tietjen’s Jesus then begins to draw the line a little more sharply between law-keeping as a route to righteousness and the forgiveness of sinners’ sins by which even sinners can live under the reign of God. As Matthew is called to be a disciple, Matthew throws a dinner because “Matthew wanted them to see that they (sinners) too could change their lives and live under the reign of God” (p. 33). Jesus is then confronted with the haunting question by “some of the Pharisees,” “How dare your teacher eat with sinners?” (p. 33). The radically inclusive character of the reign of God is even pushed further with the incident of the Canaanites woman where Tietjen’s Jesus “learned that the benefits of God’s reign are not intended just for the lost sheep of the house of Israel but for all people” (p. 38). As with the Gospels, the chapters unfold with the surprise of God’s grace announced by Jesus in the reign of God: the woman taken in adultery is rescued by Jesus whose writing in the dirt is about the sins of her accusers (pp. 64-65); the Zaccheus incident (p. 63); and other familiar stories from the Gospels which support Jesus “teaching about the reign of God who forgives and welcomes all” (p. 63).

The stories Tietjen’s Jesus recounts are meant to reveal the message that the reign of God is inclusive, compassionate and forgiving of any who receive God’s reign through their faith. Jesus even mentions that he does not share the attitudes of his age about women whom Jesus

regularly invites to be his disciples along with the precious value of children who participate fully in the reign of God (p. 67).

3. Some Important GapsThere are, however, some important gaps in Tietjen's narrative. These may be due to the burden of time for the author to have developed before his health succumbed to his disease, but for whatever reason the gaps are there. The chief one is the cross and its many layers of meaning. For Tietjen, a theologian of the cross as John Damm notes in his Forward, not giving the cross its due is conspicuous by its absence, especially when the Gospels themselves so converge on the crucifixion account. To be sure, Tietjen's Jesus gives the reader some hints that there's a cross in his future. As Jesus says, "I will continue my work, with God leading me, calling sin by its name and offering God's forgiveness and peace for all" (p. 47), Jesus then adds to instruct his disciples, "You have to give up your lives for others" (p. 47). Then later, in reflecting on what it might mean to have been twice called "God's Son," Jesus states:

*As God's Son, God is working through me. God could experience through my suffering and death all human suffering and death. Part of the good news would then be that not one of us ever suffers or dies apart from God's intimate awareness of our suffering and death. God is entering all human experience, including suffering and death through me, God's Son. It is an awesome thought... (pp. 51-52).*

Regrettably, this great theme is never developed nor is Jesus' death fleshed out for its meaning about the reign of God, except, perhaps as Jesus tells how he intends to go to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover with the Twelve:



"I intend to give them a ritual...remembering my death that will connect us, my broken body and my shed blood" (p. 75). Yet, maybe one of the reasons Tietjen never develops the cross theme nor confronts the crucifixion narrative directly is that his Jesus, while faithfully submitting to the guiding of God, even at the end struggles as he says, "I am sure I am following God's leading, but it is not given to me to understand it" (p. 75). The exception comes as Jesus finds a word to explain to his disciples how they are to be not one another's lords but servants like he. Jesus says, "'Ransom,'" that's the word. It had just flowed out of me" (p. 59). Jesus continues:

*A ransom brings freedom! As I thought about it I realized that word gives one more way to understand the purpose of my suffering and death. I was to suffer and die so that people might be set free from the power of sin and death (p. 59).*

While there is no doubt that Tietjen's Jesus means to link ransom to the cross, it is never really debriefed. One still is left to wonder, "How exactly does that work?"

At any rate, while the cross is implicitly there, The Gospel According to Jesus gives us a Jesus who goes up to Jerusalem and then suddenly in the final chapter gives us a Mary who briefly tells the rest of the story without unpacking its cruciformed meaning and emphasizing the empty tomb. Yet, even there, it is Mary who wonders what it all could mean, as now the Risen Lord makes his post-resurrection appearances:

*The liveliness in him is greater and freer. He possesses a bigger life. He has a life that we can almost imagine, but have never seen before. Could this be what life is*

*like when one is fully and completely living in what he called the reign of God?...Not merely life after death, a continued living with the same limitations, struggles and pains. Not just restoration to the life they had known before. A new kind of life. Something bigger, freer, more powerful, more beautiful. Resurrection! Life lived to the fullest under the reign of God.*

*Resurrection!*

*We shall all have to pray to understand it!...(p. 83).*

Indeed. One would have hoped for more but Tietjen leaves us with all the great questions about cross, resurrection and the meaning of the reign of God and few answers on how it all ties together. Still, perhaps that is where the author means to leave us: to live the question whose answers are far too awesome for mortals to grasp, except in small parts.

The other gap in the narrative, perhaps flowing from the first, is the under use of the Fourth Evangelist's Gospel. To be sure, the Evangelist's account appears here and there, as Jesus, for example, ponders being "the Lamb of God" (p. 51) or as Jesus confronts the Samaritan woman (pp. 56-57) or with the raising of Lazarus ( pp. 63-65), still the Synoptic accounts are clearly favored. What is at issue in noticing this is that what so captured Luther in St. John's Gospel, such as the clean distinction between "Moses" on the one hand and "Christ" on the other (e.g., John 1: 17) is never developed in Tietjen's presentation. One wonders if Tietjen's struggling Jesus who, nevertheless, faithfully follows the guidance of God and the Evangelist John's Jesus who continually claims "I am" can be fully squared. But then, again, one could say

that about the Synoptic accounts and the Fourth Evangelist's account generally.

4. Conclusion Still, Tietjen's Jesus is compelling, convincing, winsome and credible, as the author has sorted through the overwhelming material from the Gospels and woven this beautiful tapestry together in a simple, clear and elegant way. One of the work's chief strengths is its usefulness for people who want to know, "Who is this Jesus?" Tietjen's answer, coming from the faith of one of God's most gentle and faithful servants, gives an answer worthy of Luther's explanation to the Second Article. "Here is the Jesus who had been all along my Lord." I commend the book highly as an excellent guide to discussing honestly who Jesus is in most any setting. On the strength of the parting gift alone by the author (would that he had had more time to develop it more fully), it will be regarded as a treasure.

Sun City Center, Florida

July 20, 2007

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## **A Review of Carl Braaten's "Principles of Lutheran Theology"**

Carl E. Braaten, *Principles of Lutheran Theology*, Second Edition (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007)

A few weeks ago, Ed Schroeder handed me his own copy of Carl

Braaten's Principles of Lutheran Theology (Second Edition) and asked whether I might append a word for Thursday Theology in review of this text. Ed was well aware that Carl Braaten was my Doktorvater. For Carl's impeccable courage and willingness to work with me and see me through the process of getting my Ph.D. (though at the time it was still called a Th.D.), I will forever be grateful.

In this second edition, appearing 24 years since the first edition, one will note the same seven chapters corresponding to the seven principles he wishes to lift up for our Lutheran integrity: canon, confession, ecumenism, christocentricity (really, about soteriology or salvation), sacrament, law/gospel, and two-kingdoms.

What is different in this second edition is his inclusion of a chapter on The Trinitarian Principle. Commenting on the difference, Braaten notes, "Ever since its [the first edition's] publication I was aware of a glaring shortcoming. There was no chapter on God." (ix)

I purchased and read the first edition of Principles, interestingly enough, the very year I entered doctoral studies at LSTC in 1983. It was hot off the presses. For some, this book's appearance marked a change from Braaten as the champion of liberationists to being liberation theology's critic. To be sure, there are criticisms of liberation theology in Principles; but it would be a caricature to consider Braaten antithetical to the concern of liberation of the oppressed. Braaten, for his part, has always maintained that. Perhaps this rereading has helped me to see a little more clearly that he was right.

In fact, this rereading has helped me to see that Braaten continues to be a passionate advocate for confessional integrity, and for that I would see him as a kindred spirit.

There are also signs of ecumenical hope in his work (part of his desire to be an “evangelical catholic”), which correspond with his choice of seeking to work these last many years at the Center for Catholic and Evangelical Theology. His own Doktorvater was Paul Tillich; and it was Tillich who called for holding up both Protestant principle and Catholic substance. Carl has much of Tillich’s fervor in his work.

His undaunted pointing to the gospel as the center of Scripture is powerfully inviting. In this rereading, I find his criticisms of Protestant fundamentalism on the use of Scripture and canon ring out with a freshness today that needs greater hearing. Reading Scripture apart from Luther’s “canon within the canon” (was Christum treibt-what conveys/urges/necessitates Christ) is to miss the message. But there are many who legalistically contend for a kind of authority of Scripture and an undifferentiated sense of canonicity does precisely that damage. “This flat, undifferentiated view of the books of the Bible finally triumphed and today survives in Protestant fundamentalism; some Lutherans are located in this group.” (11) Maybe a few more than “some.”

His understanding of Lutheranism as a confessional movement within the body of Christ is likewise refreshing (35-37). We need to be continuing to ask the place of “justification by faith alone” in the midst of a church and world that often disowns this principle. If we forget this, if we forget the *semper reformanda* (which is not separation from the church, but reforming the church) in this effort, Braaten maintains, we may as well pack it in as Lutherans. We would be betraying our own heritage.

I also find that Braaten’s new chapter has the merit of lifting up the value and place of Trinitarian thinking in spite of general disregard for the teaching in many universities. The

contention for a new way of doing natural theology, in this regard, is seen by Braaten as not incompatible with Luther's sense of the *deus absconditus* (the hidden God). His analysis of Karl Jasper's on the subject is particularly intriguing and helpful in giving us a sense of the nature of how God is real but not in a way that we can appreciate God's realness, a presence that begs for revealing in the presence of Jesus the Christ, grasped by faith. "Luther's *deus absconditus* is a God who exerts pressure on the backs of all persons and institutions to do what is right, demand justice, apply the law, and secure the common good, even at times against their own self-interest." (82) But Luther's theology of the cross "meets God in the suffering and death of the crucified Jesus" (85), over/against all the theologies of glory that misrepresent God in all of God's fullness. "In Jesus Christ there takes place an exchange of attributes, an action that Luther called the 'blessed exchange' (*die froehliche Wechsel*). Jesus takes all that we are in our sinful humanity so that we might receive all that he has from the plentitude of his divinity." (86) In many ways, this chapter is a helpful addition, even more openly appealing to Luther (six of his twenty-one indexed references to Luther are in this chapter alone).

I guess I would still have preferred, though, that Braaten had made more explicit reference to the confessions in his attempts to put together principles of Lutheran theology. Those were lacking in his first work, and of course, still lack here since the other chapters were not revisited. In particular, for example, is a noticeable absence of seeing the place of Article IV in the Apology as a useful hermeneutic for Scripture. To be sure, he cites the shibboleth of justification by faith alone and all the solas, but the substance is not as crisp or clear as it might otherwise be had he gone to explore how Apology IV helps provide a hermeneutic over the real problematic

alternative-opinio legis, our leaning toward the law in biblical hermeneutics.

This is also apparent to me in his treatment of the teaching on ministry. Rather than seeing the ministry as an issue of old vs. new (as in 2 Corinthians, for example), he sees ministry as dichotomized between high church (ordained) over low church (laity) (53ff.) He cites AC VII, but the issue here is AC V-and again, seeing the fuller treatment of ministry in Apology IV (which took up articles IV, V, VI, and XX) would have been useful.

And again, this distinction of law and gospel might have provided keener insights on the treatment of the two-kingdoms, seeing them as “both kingdoms” of God but different ways that God deals with the world-as different as justice and mercy. To be sure, Braaten is on track with this to some degree, but an authentic Lutheran view here is hard to discern from the larger impetus of Karl Barth (Barth receives almost as many notations as Luther).

Why not, when articulating principles of Lutheran theology, truly go ad fontes and bring the freshness of the Lutheran confessions to bear on the signs of our times today? I think that is still possible-and still liberating and ecumenical and refreshing in the promise of the gospel of Jesus the Christ.

The Reverend Dr. Michael Hoy  
July 2007

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# The Confessing Church in the Midst of Empire

The latest round of work by the Lutheran World Federation's "Theology in the Life of the Church" series focuses on the theme of "Confessing and Living Our Faith in the Triune God: Being the Church in the Midst of Empire." I was privileged to be invited as one of the 20 global theologians to present a paper and discuss this topic at the gathering June 27-30, 2007, hosted at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota. There were representatives from South Africa, Tanzania, Argentina, India, Germany, Denmark, Switzerland, Canada, England, and the United States. I only knew a handful of the participants when I arrived. By the end of our time together, however, I was privileged to find many new friends in this global community.

The "empire" in question is largely the United States of America and all its constituents under the larger pyramid (G-8, Corporations, etc.). Coming to an understanding about what all we mean by empire was more descriptive ("signs of the time") than strictly definitive. Most notably were the evidences of unlimited quests for power and profit and the avoidance of accountability. Some of the helpful pre-reading on unpacking establishing the idea of imperial elements for the conference included the essays by Ninian Koshy ("The global empire: an overview") and the World Alliance of Reformed Churches' "An Ecumenical Stance Against Global Empire for a Liberated Earth Community" (both published, along with other essays, in *Reformed World*, Vol. 56 [4], December 2006). If you need further reinforcement of this theme, just browse through many of Ed Schroeder's numerous commentaries on the theology of empire and the GBA [God Bless America] Folk Religion in past Thursday Theologies.



Dr. Karen Bloomquist, head of the LWF Department for Theology and Studies and convenor of this seminar, provided the keynote address of the topic as we gathered on Wednesday night (June 27). "A common assumption in other parts of the world is that very little is happening theologically from with the US to challenge what is going on. Church folks seem mostly silent, complicit with the assumptions and policies of Empire, reinforced by expressions of religiosity that are the handmaiden to Empire... What in the world is being done theologically to counter the assumptions and practices of Empire?" Thursday and Friday (June 28 & 29) were filled with presentations and responses. For me the day started at 4:30 am with my wake-up call from my host, Gary Simpson, and speed-reading through the papers (usually over a few cups of coffee) until the first set of presentations at 8:30 am. These presentations continued throughout the day until 5:30 pm before we would break for dinner and evening conversations (sometimes going until 11:30 or midnight). Saturday (June 30) was the formal planning for the project of preparing all these papers for distribution in a forthcoming volume on the topic of being the Church in the midst of Empire.

In response to Karen's query, "what in the world is being done theologically to counter the assumptions and practices of Empire?" here is a brief snapshot of the five foci with which the conference concluded:

1. A critical history of empire. How will we examine what empire has been and has become? There is a general consensus from this group of theologians that empire is not an endearing reality-nor is it enduring. But it is being supported by "a particular brand of evangelical theology" (Charles Amjad-Ali, Luther Seminary, USA), and it does tend to promote "fundamentalism and totalitarianism" (Willy Hanson, ISEDET, Buenos Aires,

Argentina) as well a sexist patriarchy (Evangeline Anderson-Rajkumar, Bangalore, India). How does a “theology of the cross” help to uplift not only the deadly cruelty of empire, as well as the solution to an enlivening future?

2. Narratives in the midst of empire. Empire has its own narrative, one which the group feels is damaging to the human and environmental spirit of our world. What new narrative comes from the Holy Spirit? (Cheryl Peterson, Trinity Seminary, USA, at least asks) There are our own personal narratives of experience of seeking to live the Christian life faithfully. One of these was shared by Pr. William Strehlow, Geneva, Switzerland. What is the narrative of the church-the narrative of faith? Mary Joe Philip, Indian doctoral student at LSTC, highlights how the narrative of the church calls us to the edges of life that the empire has long since discarded.
3. Confessing in the midst of empire. Are we living in “a time of confessing” (Formula of Concord, Article X)? I was especially invited to this conference to discuss these criteria of times of confessing, when the gospel of our Lord Jesus the Christ is at stake. Such times, to be sure, are times of oppression-of people (and probably we would include environment), but also, and significantly, of the gospel itself. That usually means that the church authorities themselves are violating the substance of what it means for us to be “one” in the gospel. Is that the case in the midst of empire today? There are some signs that maybe so, but not all were takers on the idea of our being in statu confessionis-at least not yet. Nonetheless, the criteria laid out by Robert W. Bertram on such times of confessing give us food for thought: a) there are witnesses who are on trial for their faith, oppressed by authority, usually the church’s own; but it is not only

they who are persecuted, but the gospel itself; b) these witnesses point to the authority of the Gospel as authority enough for the church's life and unity; c) their witness is profoundly ecumenical, shared by the whole faithful church; d) these witnesses, by their faithful testimony, reprioritize the evangelical authority of the church so that is not confused with the temporal authority of the law, and vice versa, the temporal authority of the law is not confused with the gospel; e) these witnesses appeal for and to the oppressed who are afflicted in this time of oppression (which is also a time for confessing); and f) no one is more aware of their ambiguous certitude in making this confession than the confessors themselves-but they are nonetheless right in making their confession. In relation to such times of discernment, how does the Holy Spirit help see us through our moral blindness? That was the question of Cynthia Moe-Lobeda, Seattle University, USA. And how does the church become a community of belonging that embraces the "otherness" in a world where such "otherness" is not sanctioned by empire? That was the concern of Johannes Swart, South African doctoral student at Luther Seminary.

4. Citizenship and Social Location in the midst of empire. Gary Simpson (Luther Seminary, USA) focused on the theme of civil repentance. Building on Martin Luther's treatise "On War Against the Turk," Simpson contends that national repentance is a continual calling for Christians. "Without repentance a nation can lose its soul." Lincoln's 1863 address on a "Proclamation Appointing a National Fast Day" is cited as an illustration of such efforts toward "patriotic repentance" in America. While Reinhold Niebuhr (Structure of Nations and Empires) recognized the place of "power" and "prestige" as pillars in nations, Simpson contends that a third element is needed: publicity, or

public (critical) accountability (which approximates national repentance). "Without 'publicity,' the power of strong nations remains unfettered and prone toward empire.... When publicity becomes the coin of international order, powerful nations become civic internationalists, and this opens the way for just peacebuilding practices." Jack Nelson-Pallmeyer, who teaches at the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul USA and is also currently running for a seat in the US Senate, wants to lift up the anti-imperial and non-violent streams that he sees in the Scriptures, though he is cognizant that there are other streams of thought in the biblical literature that speak of judgment (I'm not too sure he's got the two-kingdoms down well, but it was entertaining). How does our Lord Jesus the Christ call us into solidarity with the disenfranchised as his chosen, and what are the implications of that in our relationships in society? That was the question of Peter Lodberg (Aarhus, Denmark). And how much have the powers of empire co-opted the structures and cultures of our world? That was the query of Deenabandhu Manchala (WCC, Indian scholar living in Geneva, Switzerland).

5. Hope in the midst of empire. This group was a collection of the marvelous plethora of the other papers, all helpful reflections. John Hoffmeyer (LTS, Philadelphia, USA) commented on the discerning differences between need and desire in a consumerist society. Allen Jorgenson (Waterloo Lutheran Seminary, Canada) described how our faith in the triune God leads us become the unceasing quantification that is a mania for empire. Deanna Thompson (Hamline University, St. Paul, USA) would have us embrace the sense of what it means to be "friends" in the Johannine/NT sense of the term in a world where this is diminished. Faith Lugaza (Tanzanian doctoral student at Luther Seminary)

calls us to challenge the Prosperity Theology of empire with a compassionate care for the poor. Margaret Obaga (African doctoral student at Luther Seminary) examines how African women living in the United States have been subjected to violence and abuse, and how remedies can be found in attending (community solidarity), mediating, and advocating. Elieshi Mungure (Tanzanian doctoral student at Luther Seminary), on a similar vein, calls for the transformation of these violent and abusive imperialist signs through embracing justice and equality on the one hand, and forgiveness and healing on the other.

Well, these are my re-presentations of what various folks at the conference were saying, and if there are any misrepresentations, I'll take the hit on that. It should be noted that there is still a lot of work to be done in refinishing this work in the coming months. If readers of ThTh have some thoughts that would help, let me know by writing back to Crossings (and I hope the editors of the website can help convey that info).

In faith and hope in the promises of Christ, we press on, even in the midst of empire!

Peace and Joy!

Mike

The Reverend Dr. Michael Hoy

Pastor, Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, St. Louis, Missouri

Former Dean, Lutheran School of Theology, St. Louis

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# Missio and Promissio—Mission and Promise

Colleagues,

[A Pre-script. This ThTh #473 posting comes a tad early in the week. Here's why: Marie and I, d.v., early on the morning of July 4, are heading out of the country for most of the rest of the month. ThTh #474, 475, 476 are already in the pipeline. D.v., they will be posted by listmaster Nathan Schroeder at the appropriate times. Mike Hoy is composing 474 (Theology of Empire) and 475 (review of Carl Braaten's revised 2nd ed. "Principles of Lutheran Theology"), Steve Krueger is working on 476 (review of John Tietjen's posthumously published "The Gospel According to Jesus"). All of it worth waiting for.]

For about 30 years I've been a member of the American Society of Missiology [ASM]. Last month I attended our annual meeting at the "Divine Word" [Roman Catholic] conference center in Techny Illinois, not far from Chicago's O'Hare airport. It's a Friday, Saturday and Sunday event. This time I showed up a day early for the "mini-conference" that regularly precedes the ASM get-together, the 24-hour gathering of the American Professors of Mission [APM]. My reason for sneaking in on the APM, where I officially don't fit, is that their program this year was a real draw.

Truth to tell, I don't fit in the ASM either—a retired professor of systematic theology!—but Seminex's "real" missiologist (and Missouri Synod's first ever, and now of blessed memory) William Danker took me along once back in the 1970s to the ASM get-together. He was one of the founders, so he could get away with bringing in a Philistine. Even without the proper "wedding garment" I was let in, and I've been showing up ever since. The

“real” missiologists have befriended me. As a dear RC colleague in the ASM puts it recently: Schroeder had a “late-in-life conversion” to missions. And he’s not all wrong.

So I listen to them, and they to me, in the happiest ecumenical group I’ve ever known. And, no surprise, we don’t all agree—often on basic stuff. Such as: just what is THE Gospel? Which question often is just below the surface, but is hard to elevate into focused discussion.

However, that one was bound to surface, I thought, as this year’s APM program unfolded. Here’s how it went. Three recent missiology books, some approaching classic status, and widely used throughout the world, were the stuff for the entire agenda. In two cases where the authors were still alive, they were there to show-and-tell what they had in mind as they composed the texts, what they learned along the way, what they’ve learned since then, using the texts in their classrooms. For the third author, dear departed David Bosch, one of his brightest and best students initiated the discussion. Thereafter others who are using these texts in their own teaching came forward and gave their witness.

But before we get to those three texts, this detour: You need to know how the organizations (both APM and ASM) are put together. Way back when the founders did the founding they divvied up the diverse Christian world into three groups. Roman Catholics, “Conciliar” [=World Council of Churches] Protestants, and Conservative Independent Evangelical Protestants [who aren’t WCC affiliated]. Officers and board and committee members are elected according to this triadic formula, and since the beginning it’s worked. Doubtless the glue that holds us together is the common commitment to Christian mission—and for most of the members long years of “friendly” ecumenical contacts out on the mission frontiers.

But, of course, there are folks who don't easily find a place in the troika—Eastern Orthodox Christians, for instance, and the burgeoning numbers of Pentecostals world-wide that show up all over the triad. And according to my druthers, we Lutherans don't easily find our place in the troika either. Most world Lutheran churches are members of the WCC, so that suggests "conciliar," right? Well, maybe not, since Lutherans world-wide also claim to be "evangelical" Lutherans. So does that mean the third group? And some Augsburg-conscious Lutherans will self-identify as "evangelical catholics," so where does that put them? Even so, in the APM/ASM we're conciliar Protestants.

So far, the troika works. When questions come up, jurisdictional lines blur, the edges are porous, and no one objects. Which signals a missions-cause unity that transcends the organizational blueprint.

OK, now back to the APM meeting last month. It was structured according to the troika. Three textbooks, one each from the three traditions—RC, conciliar protestant, conservative evangelical protestant.

The RC text was Steve Bevans and Roger Schroeder's "Contents in Context: A Theology of Mission for Today" (2004). Steve and Roger were there to lead the discussion. The "conciliar" text was David Bosch's magnum opus "Transforming Mission" (1991). David is no longer alive. His spokesman was his one-time grad student Stan Nussbaum. Stan has recently published "A Reader's Guide to TRANSFORMING MISSION," affectionately called "Baby Bosch" among the members. And for the third option we heard A.Scott Moreau present his recent "Introducing World Missions" (2004) coming from the conservative evangelical tradition.

All three of these currently classic texts seek to be ecumenically inclusive and non-sectarian. But as Steve Bevans



was quick to say, nudged by my comment mentioned below: “We can’t—nor do we try to—deny where we’re coming from.” And that “where we’re coming from” is finally a particular take on what the Christian Gospel, that central substance of Christian mission, is. Together with such particulars about the Gospel comes a particular take on what faith in that Gospel, the goal of Christian mission, amounts too. So we got “into theology,” and not “just” missiology—and I wasn’t the only one interested in pursuing that topic. But gadflies are still gadflies, and ecumenical etiquette appears to get stretched when alternatives are juxtaposed too briskly.

When Gospel-probing duty’s to be done,  
A theolog’s lot is not (always) a happy one.

At one point in the discussion with Bevans/Schroeder, one of the APM’s veterans—Dana Robert, a Methodist—asked them something that sounded “Lutheran” to me. After their response I was next, so I picked up on Dana’s (possibly unwitting) Lutheran intervention and contrasted it with the primordial RC blueprint of Steve and Roger’s book: “Isn’t Dana’s proposal—whether or not she’d admit it—the Lutheran alternative to the fundamental RC blueprint of Constants in Context? Isn’t C in C building from the classic nature/grace axiom of medieval scholasticism? [And for them, Catholic theologians trained in Rome, I couldn’t resist quoting it in Latin! But then translated for the hoi polloi] Grace does not supplant nature, but brings it to fulfillment. Your Constants are the grace referent, and your Contexts are the nature referent. C-1 brings C-2 to perfection.” Said Bevans: “We cannot deny, nor do we wish to deny, where we are coming from.”

Here’s how it plays out: “Contexts” in their title are the 21st century “nature” components of the axiom, the God-created world—damaged, incomplete, needing help. The “Constants” are the

“grace” components of God’s restorative work throughout history, culminating in Christ and the 2 millennia of the church’s history thereafter. As in every age, grace-constants bring today’s world-contexts to their God-intended fulfillment. That’s the Bevans/Schroeder mission paradigm for the 21st century. Thereby the GOSPEL itself is understood as God’s multi-faceted goodness “constant” throughout church and world history and constantly pressing for the full and final transformation of “damaged” human nature, and the “groaning” creation still longing for its own complete healing. FAITH’s response is simply to stop saying no, and start saying yes to God’s constant grace-pressure. In Latin-language Roman piety, it is the Virgin Mary’s own “Fiat” response. “Let it be.”

The discussion didn’t get much further in plenum, though at the coffee break it did continue. Dana Robert assured me that she did not object to my tarring her with the Lutheran brush. “Though I am a Methodist, I learned my theology at Yale from George Lindbeck and Sidney Ahlstrom—and they were Lutherans.”

What surfaced when the “conciliar” Protestant textbook was opened was Calvin’s Protestantism, not Luther’s. Which, of course, is no surprise. That was David Bosch’s Dutch Reformed theology in his native South Africa. Even in his wide-ranging ecumenical sweep with impressive insight and expertise, the cantus firmus of “Transforming Mission” is “covenant and law” with roots going back to Geneva.

The “transforming” term in his title is Bosch’s intended pun. In the first sense “transforming” is adjectival. Christian mission is and always has been a transforming business. People get changed. In David’s core paradigm covenant-disconnected people are transformed into covenant-connected peoples.

In the second sense “transforming” is verbal and “mission” the

object of that verbal action. Mission-thinking, mission-practice, needs transforming for the 21st century because the Enlightenment paradigms that have been in place in the so-called “modern” mission era no longer hold water. The European Enlightenment set the rubrics for what we once called the “modern world” and mission thought and practice was in, with, and under that umbrella too.

But the Enlightenment no longer reigns. Post-modern, multi-cultural, globalization—terms such as these now signal that the old wineskins have burst. So Christian mission thinking and praxis, once wed to Enlightenment paradigms, must change too—be transformed—or it too shall pass away. Bosch’s agenda in the book is just that, “transforming mission.”

The paradigms of today’s very different post-modern “world contexts” call for the “transforming-as-verb,” for Christian mission to take new form, to orient itself to the post-modern paradigms. The urgency for doing that is precisely in order to enable Mission to be “transforming-as-adjective,” namely, to connect with today’s covenant-disconnected humanity and transform their lives into covenant-connected, and then covenant-obedient, disciples.

Both of these classics—Bosch’s and Bevans-Schroeder’s—I had read before. The latter I’d reviewed for ThTh when it was published. Bosch’s text I’d actually used as a text for a missions seminar on my first stint as Global Mission Volunteer in Australia at the Lutheran Seminary there way back in 1994, shortly after it came off the press. It is a monumental work, his life’s work, encyclopedic, and profound. So profound, that folks at the APM assembly welcomed Nussbaums’s “Baby Bosch,” a “Bosch for the Less Profound,” maybe even a “Bosch for Dummies,” as someone quipped.

Back in the 1980s I was blessed to become David Bosch's friend through missiology connections at the international level as Bill Danker also nudged me overseas to gatherings of the International Association for Mission Studies [IAMS]. David also showed up now and then at our ASM meetings in those days. I'd even crashed once in the Bosch home in Pretoria during an IAMS event in 1985. I wasn't very astute at that time about Luther's alternate to the "Missio Dei" mantra that was reigning then in the missiological world.

Though Bosch has kind pages on Luther in his magnum opus, *Blessed Martin* is a stone unused as he proceeds with his covenant-cornerstone architecture. So downunder in Oz, when I used his text, I added what I was beginning to learn from Luther on the topic to the class repertoire. In the intervening years there's been transformation going on with yours truly too. Especially on the Aha! that follows for Christian Mission theology from the "Augsburg Aha!" about the Gospel itself.

But back to the APM conversation this year.

Third text was A Scott Moreau's "Introducing World Missions" (2004). In the preface he tells us this is "the first in a series . . . focusing on mission from an evangelical perspective." It is "gentle" evangelicalism, I'd say, a scholarly, world-savvy (Bob Bertram might even have said "winsome") evangelicalism, but Scott in no way soft-peddles "where he's coming from." For example:

- Mission is the call to urge people to respond to Christ and to live lives reflecting his kingdom.
- The sovereignty of God is . . . in charge of mission. Through the panorama of Scripture . . . from beginning to end, the themes of God's deep love for all people, our subsequent rebellion against him, Christ's sacrificial

giving of himself, our responsibility to worship God by reflecting his glory, and calling the nations to repentance have been clear and compelling.

- What then is our foundation for mission? In the most general sense, the only possible foundation is the Bible itself.
- Evangelicals focus on God's concern for the world and human estrangement from God as the core issue that mission addresses, with PERSONAL EVANGELISM and CHURCH PLANTING being the core activities that address the human dilemma of separation from God.
- God's glory and our reflection of his glory through worship [are] the guiding themes for mission theology.
- The core of our responsibility of reflecting God's glory through worship is (1) to engage in evangelism and church planting, as well as (2) discipling those who enter the kingdom and enabling local churches to thrive and grow, (3) while glorifying God by living lives that act as salt and light in a hurting world.
- The kingdom of God . . . represents an attitude toward life that puts God first in all that Christians do, enabling personal and corporate growth.
- Mission is successful when God's rules are followed.
- Discipleship and growth, both individual and corporate, come through obeying all that Jesus taught and through teaching others to do likewise.
- Christians are to display kingdom ethics (i.e., ethics built on God's sovereignty over our lives) . . . to live their lives by God's rules.

The "conclusion" in Scott's chapter on "mission theology" is: "The mission of the church is that it be used by God (1) to witness to people about the reconciliation offered in Christ; (2) to invite people to worship their creator by leading them to Christ; (3) to incorporate these led to Christ into local church

contexts; and (4) to teach them, as people reconciled to God, to obey all that Christ commanded in being salt and light in the world.”

What I hear Moreau articulating is core conservative evangelicalism with its Arminian and perfectionist overtones:

1. It starts with the Bible.
2. From which we learn of sovereign God the creator, of our human disobedience in not giving God glory, of God’s own long-term reconciling mission offered in Christ.
3. Faith is the decision/commitment to respond to Christ’s offer and to live lives reflecting his kingdom, a kingdom characterized by its distinctive ethics.
4. Christians reflect Christ’s kingdom . . . display kingdom ethics . . . when they live their lives by God’s rules.
5. Discipleship is growth in such kingdom ethics.
6. Christ’s mission mandate is a major rule that disciples readily follow.
7. Mission replicates for others what has happened with each disciple.
8. It is the call to urge people to respond to Christ and to live lives reflecting his kingdom . . . wherein God’s rules are followed, which constitutes rightful worship and gives God glory.

I wish I had read his book before the APM meeting. Why? Because at the meeting I did, and now see that in his early chapter on “Encountering Mission in the Old Testament” it’s all about Promise! God’s good news to the ancients—Adam and Eve, Abraham and Sarah—is Promise. Six times over Moreau says: promise, promise, promise. But then the word disappears, and plays no role whatsoever in those fundamental theses cited above. So far as I noticed, Promise never shows up again in the book. Which is especially strange when Scott presents New Testament mission

theology. More than 60 times that term appears in the NT, over 30 times in Paul's prose. So had I known that Scott was "promise-full" in his OT survey, I might have asked him why he did not keep up the good work and connect it to all those NT promissory texts—and ring the changes from them for mission theology.

And that might have segued again to an opening for signalling a fourth option—Luther's promise-and-faith-focused mission theology, a clear alternative to nature/grace, covenant/law or sovereignty/discipleship proposals for mission in the 21st (or any other) century.

Promise-centered mission theology is not only a stranger in ecumenical gatherings such as the APM, ASM, IAMS. It's a stranger among Lutheran missiologists too, or at most, a stepchild. Long before I got bit by the bug, Bob Bertram—at Bill Danker's request for a conference he organized—crafted an essay that did just that—spelled out a mission theology following from the Augsburg Aha! about the Gospel. Its title: "Doing Theology in Relation to Mission." Way back in 1971. Crossings colleagues on this listserve roster will not be surprised by the last of the theses in that Bertram essay: "Promissio is the secret of missio." "The promise is the secret of mission." Preserving the Latin preserves the pun.

Here's the full text: "Thesis 28. Promissio is the secret of missio. For the mission's Sender was Himself the keeping of that promise. And the mission's gaps, across which we move with our theological doings, are ultimately spanned by that same promise — of Himself by the Spirit through His Word." Bob makes it sound so obvious, especially if you go back and start with Bob's thesis #1. [The full text is on the Crossings website <[www.crosssigns.org](http://www.crosssigns.org)> When you get to the Crossings homepage, click on "Works by Bob Bertram." Scroll down to the title "Doing

Theology in Relation to Mission.”]

Yet in today’s missiology marketplace promissio is unknown. Even Lutheran missiologists (and they are not legion) haven’t been doing promissio missiology. So it’s no surprise that none of the “top three” texts we looked at during the APM assembly last month has antenna for promissory missiology either.

I’ve been telling folks that Bob’s essay is a Magna Charta for Lutheran missiology. And telling that to non-Lutherans at the ASM/APM gatherings. But it doesn’t make the front page–yet.

However, a promising light at the end of the tunnel may be coming from Luther Seminary in St.Paul MN these days. They’ve conjured up, as I understand it, a mission statement for the whole seminary that explicitly connects promissio and missio. In some of their prose it comes out “Confession and Mission.” Confessing the Gospel as God’s Promise (the Augsburg Aha!) and working out the consequences for what they call a “missional” church. If they keep focused on that commitment, Bill Danker’s and Bob Bertram’s dream may well come true. Mine too.

The fact that there are three Seminex alums, now Luther Sem profs, at work on this enterprise is possibly not insignificant. Two of them attended this year’s APM/ASM meeting—and they did not hold their peace. They also brought along eight or so of their grad students to rub elbows with the significant others in the club and learn the ropes. Luther Seminary means business! And I a m glad. Promising indeed. Stay tuned.

Peace and joy!

Ed Schroeder

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# Memento Mori

Colleagues,

Memento mori. Although it's Latin, it's in the English part of my Webster's 10th edition, not in the "Foreign Words and Phrases" at the end. Says Webster: "A reminder of mortality. (L, Remember that you must die.)" A whole bunch of these memento mori have come our way in the last six months, six of these mementos from Valparaiso University. My first paid job started at Valpo exactly 50 yrs ago this fall. I was there for 14 yrs – 1957-71. Bob Bertram hired me for the theology department. It's where Crossings got started.

There were several Young Turks on the faculty in those days, not only in theology. We were mesmerized by President O.P. Kretzmann to conjure and create a Lutheran University where "Athens and Jerusalem (and Wittenberg too)" intersected. You might say, where they made "crossings." It was all great adventure. Holy hoopla—and sometimes maybe not so holy.

But now we all are old and some have died. Six in the last six months. The last one, just a few days ago, was Simone Baepler, French teacher par excellence, wife of my dearest seminary class buddy Dick Baepler, whose own career at V.U. started 3 years before mine did—way back in 1954—and he's still there. But Simone is not—nor Al, nor Nancy, nor Lou, nor Carlene, nor Tom.

Did you notice that "must" in the Latin rendering above? Memento mori is not just "you WILL die" but "you MUST die." If Luther had ever seen—and could have read—the King James English translation of the Bible (published in 1611, 65 years after his death) he would have chided the English divines who produced it for being "soft" on death when they rendered that passage from Psalm 90:12 as "So teach us to number our days that we may apply

our hearts unto wisdom.”

Luther heard the original Hebrew saying: “Lehre uns zu bedenken dass wir sterben müssen, auf dass wir klug werden.” “Teach us to think about [the fact] that we MUST die, so that we get wise.” In nickel words: Death is not a “you’re gonna,” it’s a “you’ve gotta.” Christian wisdom in funeral sermons must address that “you’ve gotta” with whatever Gospel they claim to proclaim. If not, memento mori gets the last word.

Fred Niedner, current VU theology dept chair, was asked to be the homilist at some of these V.U. funerals this year. One was for theology dept. colleague Tom Droege—a major dreamer and schemer for the Athens, Jerusalem, Wittenberg intersection we were scissoring and pasting together way back then.

Here’s Fred’s proclamation at Tom’s memorial service back in April. It took place in suburban Atlanta, Georgia, where Tom and Esther Droege had moved fifteen years ago.

Note how memento mori does NOT get the last word.

Peace and joy!

Ed Schroeder

## ***The Last Passage***

### ***Homily for Thomas A. Droege Memorial Service***

***22 April 2007***

*Psalms 27:1-14*

*1 The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The LORD is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?*

*4 One thing I asked of the LORD, that will I seek after: to*

live in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the LORD, and to inquire in his temple.

5 For he will hide me in his shelter in the day of trouble; he will conceal me under the cover of his tent; he will set me high on a rock

7 Hear, O LORD, when I cry aloud, be gracious to me and answer me!

8 "Come," my heart says, "seek his face!" Your face, LORD, do I seek.

9 Do not hide your face from me. Do not turn your servant away in anger, you who have been my help. Do not cast me off, do not forsake me, O God of my salvation!

13 I believe that I shall see the goodness of the LORD in the land of the living.

14 Wait for the LORD; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the LORD!

#### *Romans 8:31-39*

31 What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? 32 He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? 33 Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. 34 Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. 35 Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? 36 As it is written, "For your sake we are being killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered." 37 No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. 38 For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, 39 nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of

*God in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

*John 11:21-27*

*21 Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. 22 But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him." 23 Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." 24 Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." 25 Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, 26 and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" 27 She said to him, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world."*

*I bring warm and heartfelt greetings, condolences, and expressions of love to all of you from the circle of colleagues and friends associated with Valparaiso University's Department of Theology, in which Tom followed his calling as a theologian and teacher for nearly 30 years. Many more than could be here this weekend have held all of you, along with Tom, close to their hearts and have remembered you in their prayers in these last months and years.*

*We've had the great blessing of keeping in touch with you over the years since first Esther, and then Tom, moved here to Atlanta. Sisters Betty and Suzie helped us at that, as did occasional publications that told of Tom's work at the Carter Center. But eventually there began the regular rhythm of e-mails to which Tom gave the simple name, report (with a small r), the first of which told us of his multiple myeloma diagnosis in January 1998. Over the ensuing months and years those reports kept us informed of the mysterious activity of the lethal stalker that followed Tom, and in a way all of you family members, right up until Maundy Thursday.*

*In the very first message about this disease, Tom made it clear there was no cure. So, for a long time we have known this moment would come, and why, if not exactly when. Several times in the most recent years we thought the moment was at hand, and perhaps Tom did as well. Two years ago, I came for a visit and said good-bye, as did any number of us here today. I was sure I'd never see or speak to Tom again on this side of the boundary of space and time. However, several months later, we sat together on the porch of the inn up at Camp Arcadia and enjoyed a wonderful afternoon doing theology, cultural analysis, and storytelling.*

*We've been doing the same thing this weekend. Only this time, Tom's chair is empty.*

*For almost 20 of Tom's years in Valparaiso's Department of Theology, I had the gift of being his colleague. I cannot count, nor can I adequately explain, how many blessings came to me, or to the rest of my colleagues, or to a generation of students, thanks to Tom. The list of students who found their vocations partly through learning in one way or another from Tom would be a long one, as would the number of those who would have given up on school, or even life itself, except for Tom's compassionate and skilled interventions.*

*When I first read the lessons chosen for this service, as Esther sent them to me a few months ago, I mistakenly opened my Bible to Ps 26 instead of 27, and this is what I read: Vindicate me, O LORD, for I have walked in my integrity, and I have trusted in the LORD without wavering. I do not sit with the worthless, nor do I consort with hypocrites; I hate the company of evildoers, and will not sit with the wicked. (Psalm 26:1, 4-5)*

*For a moment, this seemed a kind of revelation. Aha! I thought.*

Now we find out why Tom retired a few years earlier than he might have from the Valparaiso faculty, and the Department of Theology. Our department meetings had made him flee! We had some knock-down, drag-out, theological and academic donnybrooks over the years. And quite often the dynamics of those became yet another occasion for my long-standing admiration and respect for Tom. He never let himself get sucked into the swirling confusion of those free-for-alls, but seemed always to wait until just the right moment, when the heat had outstripped the light, and he'd calmly say something that would leave the rest of us looking at each other thinking, Well, yes. Of course. OK. Maybe we could all be adults here. Through most of those years, I was the kid in the department, and I would think to myself, When I grow up, I want to be like Tom. I confess today that I still tell myself that.

You family members may have stories about other sides to Tom. Surely no one is perfect, but honestly, I never saw a genuinely dark side to Tom, although I recall hearing once, I believe from Ted Ludwig, that if you ventured onto a handball court with him, you'd better be serious, or else.

We colleagues learned so much from Tom about faith development, about stages of emotional growth and maturation that assisted us in understanding and teaching our students. He worked at research projects on healing that assisted the ministries of congregations. He preached regularly at the Chapel of the Resurrection. He provided pastoral counseling and lent his expertise to a peer ministry program. He regularly taught a course called Spiritual Needs and Health Care, and, I don't know how many semesters he taught his Death and Dying course.

He left that work, officially, back in 1992, and came to work in the Carter Center, until he finally transitioned into actual retirement. But he never quit teaching about spiritual needs,

healing and health care, or death and dying. Indeed, he did some of his most powerful teaching about death and dying in these last few years of living with a terminal illness. As many of you know, after years of developing and teaching expertise at giving care, he had to learn how to receive it. So, he wrote a book. He became a teacher of receiving care. And he talked freely, honestly, and with deep insight about living with mortality, about dying.

Tom wasn't happy to be dying, but he didn't avert his eyes from its steady glare, either. Right up to the end, he insisted on having the full experience of his condition, including the pain, sometimes terrible pain, so he could learn from every single moment what life, and death, had to teach. In part, his curiosity as a scholar prompted this, and in part it was his faith, and maybe a tad of plain, old competitiveness as though he'd invited death onto the handball court.

And then there was his trusty friend, mindfulness. On February 22 of this year, in response to my reply to the last of those reports, Tom wrote about his pain, and the ways he addressed it. The mindfulness is central, I think. We never have more than the moment, the day. Live it fully, and don't dwell on what might have been, which cannot be changed, or what the morrow will bring, about which we know very little. He closed the note, A blessed Lent to you and your family with the glorious promise of Easter to follow.

Which takes us to Holy Week, and to Maundy Thursday, the beginning of those three days whose message and traditions Tom so cherished. I don't know if people get to choose their moment. Tom might have waited just a couple more days and had another birthday. But no, Maundy Thursday became for Tom the day of birthing through that narrow passage we call death. So, the rest of us received that Last Supper this year, and heard

Jesus' cry of abandonment the next afternoon, with a new finality and absence in our hearts and on our minds. Then, with wet cheeks we spoke our Alleluias and sang Easter hymns. But sing them we did.

Tom chose to have us read a resurrection story for our gospel lesson when this day came, a piece of John 11, which tells of Jesus raising Lazarus. We heard again the part in which Jesus promises Mary and Martha, I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me will have eternal life. In response, Martha confesses boldly her faith. She gives her heart to this Jesus.

Then, as we know so well, Jesus stood in the doorway of the tomb and shouted, Lazarus, come out! Lazarus came out. Next, we remember, there was the small problem of Lazarus needing some new clothes, after first being helped out of the smelly, old burial wrappings. And then things got really interesting. Threats began to fill the air, not only against Jesus, but against Lazarus as well.

So, when Jesus shouted as he did, into the door of Lazarus' tomb, he might as well have yelled instead, Heads up in there! I'm coming in!!! Because a few days later, in he went. All the way. And the door was closed once more. The Christ who called out Lazarus was on his way toward a particular kind of death, one that would change graves and dying forever. Diseases such as Tom suffered, complete with all the pain and temptation that go with them, those too got changed in Christ's taking them on, bearing them, going under and through them, all the way to the stillness of the grave.

What Jesus really says to Lazarus, and to Tom, and to all the rest of us, standing as he does in the entrances to all our graves, is something like, Tom, come out of there! Let's not



die some ordinary death due to illness, old age, or even some accident. Let's you and me go up to Jerusalem! Let's give our lives for something, for someone. No one takes our life from us. Because the life we have now, tied up in the love of God as we are, can't ever be taken away. It will never come to nothing.

Tom, like Lazarus, got called from the only tomb that could ever really hold him on the day of his baptism. And from that day on, he was headed for Jerusalem. As I said a moment ago, Tom taught Death and Dying. He was still teaching up to the end. He did so in part as a faithful follower on the road to Jerusalem, with a new relationship to dying. The Holy Spirit called Tom to work as one who understood those things Jesus asked us all to do when he said to those who watched Lazarus come out of the tomb, Unbind him, and let him go. Tom was practiced and very skilled at dealing with grave-clothes, at working on forgiveness and healing and all the other gifts of the Spirit that free us from paralysis before death and allow us to give our lives in love and service.

Finally, on Maundy Thursday, after his long journey, and so much time on both the giving and receiving end of the Spirit's holy gifts, Tom arrived in Jerusalem. Which leaves us both saddened and rejoicing. That's who we are, we followers of the crucified and risen one—partners in paradox, tear-stained victors.

So, as we mark the end which is also an arrival, it's time for a last word. The Holy Spirit always get the last word. In this moment, however, we'll hear the Spirit speak through Tom's phrases and expressions of faith.

I searched my old files of colleagues' sermons and found this, from a Palm Sunday sermon Tom preached at the Valpo chapel on

April 12, 1981. . .

*“There is no way around the valley of death’s shadow, no way to go from this life to the next without passing through it. To claim the victory of Easter without sharing the defeat of the cross, to claim the life without sharing the death. . . is to have half a gospel—really, no gospel.*

*God has never promised us that we will have a rose garden rather than a Gethsemane in our futures. God will not spare you the pain that comes with the death of a loved one. . .or the shattering news of a fatal illness. You, too, will drink from the cup of suffering. You, too, will experience moments, hours, perhaps even years of forsakenness and vulnerability. You, too will face death and face it by yourself because each of us passes through that gate in single file.”*

*A couple years later, on Easter Sunday, again in the Chapel of the Resurrection, in a sermon that opened with an account of the night DJ, only nine months old, lay gasping for breath in a hospital bed with double pneumonia and given about a 50/50 chance of living until morning, Tom preached about passages, one of his favorite metaphors. He said,*

*“Your baptism means that you have already passed over from death to life. It is your assurance that you are already on the other side, already sharing in eternal life which bridges the chasm of death and the grave, thereby eliminating the horror of entering a cavity which threatens to devour you. That’s why a baptismal pall will be placed on your casket during the liturgy of your funeral because it symbolizes the victory of Christ over death, a victory you share through your baptism. You are covered with the cloak of Christ, who guides you through that last passage of death to the light and life of your own, personal resurrection.*

*May God keep you safe through all the passages of your life, save you in the time of trial, and carry you safely to the other side where we will all join in a cosmic celebration of never-ending Easter joy."*

*By God's grace, Tom has now practiced what he preached. And we line up to take our turns. Yes, Tom, amidst our sadness at losing your dear, sweet, wise company for the rest of our years, we shall sing. We give thanks to God for the gift of your life. We celebrate all we have shared together in Christ. And we'll see you next at the empty tomb.*

*Frederick Niedner*

*Living Grace Lutheran Church, Tucker GA*

*22 April 2007*

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# Summer Solstice and Solo Survival

Colleagues,

For the first time in my life I've been tracking the sun at sunrise as it moves north on our horizon toward this day when "the sun stands still," and then starts heading south along our northern hemisphere horizon. So I've been up and out of bed to see the sunrise (still possible for an old farm boy—this morning at 4:41 standard time) and marking its progression. Literally marking. But I do this in reverse, not by noting how much further north the sun moves along the eastern treeline, but with little strips of masking tape on a western wall in our home

(with a window to the north) to show how much farther south that bright orange radiance has been moving each day. FYI it's moved 11 inches on that wall since I started taping on May 8.

After this morning it'll start moving back. Summer solstice.

But that means winter solstice for folks in most of South America, a third of Africa, all of Australia, Antarctica, and Papua New Guinea. Though in PNG, just a smidgin south of the equator, it doesn't make much difference. Sunrise, sunset, always around 6 o'clock. And that's a segue to this marvelous piece of narrative theology from PNG.

Anton Lutz, young law-promise theologian in Papua New Guinea—with “only” a B.A. in theology from Valparaiso University—is the son of long-term medical missionaries in that nation. Anton has contributed to the ThTh repertoire in the past. Just two years ago he posted an essay to us and we passed it on to you: “Legalism and the Gospel in Papua New Guinea.” <<https://crossings.org/thursday/Thur051205.htm>>

I've never met Anton face-to-face, nor anyone of his family. But sometimes I'm blessed with messages that pass around the Lutz-loop. Like this one, part of a letter from Julie Lutz, Anton's mother, that came my way third hand. I wanted to pass it on to the ThTh listserve, but I didn't know her e-address. So I zapped an email to Anton in PNG. He responds saying that he's out-bush somewhere “among the Penale people” building an airstrip. He uses solar panels to generate juice so he can stay cyber-connected. He'll forwarded my request to his mom back at the clinic, wherever that is. Just minutes ago—whew!—I got her OK. For which I am thankful. Her story is just too good not to spread around. Way at the end below I'll pass on to you Julie's message to me.

*Dear Family and Friends, Two weeks ago I had one of those flat-*

footed experiences. Our son Anton and I had gone to Mt Hagen with a PNG friend. We stopped for a quick pit-stop at the Highlander Hotel, and I scurried in right past the security guards. But Solo, our friend, was stopped cold. "Are you a guest here?" Everything about him – his well-worn clothes, his attempt at an unobtrusive entrance – made it obvious he wasn't. Solo was flustered and tried to mutter an explanation, but in the face of the guard, he could say nothing. No way would the guard let Solo pass. I stopped, not sure whether I should go or come, and then Anton strolled in. He quickly assessed the situation and said confidently to the guard, "He's with me. Is there a problem?" The guard adjusted his stance saying, "No, sir; no problem," and Solo and Anton walked in.

I would normally file the incident under "uncomfortable examples of white privilege" and move on, except for one thing. The scene shifted in my mind, and it occurred to me that this is what Jesus does for me and you. I might think I can waltz my way into God's heaven or if stopped, convince Him I'm worthy of His love, pointing to my relatively good conduct, right belief, or fervent repentance. But truth be told, in the face of God, I have nothing, absolutely nothing, to say on my own behalf. My best self-recommendation sputters hopelessly, and so does yours. It's then that Jesus strides up, stands by me and says, "She's with me." And on we go. +++

Julie's proclamation should really be the finale for this week's posting.

But I can't resist. Solo and solstice. Solstice = the sun stops. "We stopped for a pit-stop." Solo was stopped, "stopped cold," Julie says. Solo and solstice. Stop, stop, stop. Aren't we all? White privilege—or moral privilege, money privilege, I.Q. privilege—notwithstanding. "Stopped cold," to mix a metaphor, by

the searing heat of the divine spotlight. With nothing any longer “un-exposed”—when ALL the lights are turned on—we all look shabby, “flustered,” can “say nothing.” Not only before the divine examiner, but before our human companions as well.

And then the Aha! of another Son’s stopping at the very spot where we’re stopped cold: “She’s with me. Is there any problem?” And the cosmic security guard says: “No, sir; no problem.” Standing still, our standing still, alongside that Solstice-Son, our By-stander, generates the cosmic version of the Porgy and Bess libretto—no matter what the temperature, nor when the sun comes up. “She’s with me, he’s with me” so it’s “Summer time. And the livin’ is easy.”

Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder

*Greetings, Ed. If you still think you need permission, it is readily – and humbly – given. The incident was one of those ‘ding’ moments that I never thought was meant for me alone. Good additions in the Solstice Son!*

*Bel isi long Bikpela, (\*)*

*Julie*

*[(\*) I asked a PNG veteran to translate. “Bel isi long Bikpela” is “Peace in the Lord” in Melanesian Pidgin English.]*

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## Assorted Gospel Tidbits—Some

# from Luther, Some from Others

Colleagues,

"Summertime and the livin' is easy," Bess (of Porgy and Bess) sings to us in that American classic opera. Revised Schroeder version of that libretto is "Summertime and I'm just a tad lazy." So herewith some tidbits that have accumulated on my desk—not all of them from Luther, but most. The Luther items come from my attempt to find documentation in his own writings for what I've said he was doing in hermeneutics. Which is, that he was consciously replacing the nature-and-grace hermeneutics of scholasticism with the law-and-promise hermeneutics, that "Aha!" he found in the Bible itself, that he once called his own "breakthrough."

A number of you have made suggestions where to look, but I haven't found (yet) him saying that flat-out, so I keep on keeping on. But I have found interesting stuff in some of the Luther stuff you have recommended. So I pass these gems on to you.

Peace and joy!

Ed Schroeder

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## I. LUTHER STUFF

Law-Gospel Distinction—a Very Thin Tradition You (will) find nothing about this distinction between law and gospel at the universities, among the professors, or the theologians—not even in the church fathers. Augustine knew a bit of it, but Jerome not at all. Where this distinction

is not preserved, Christian doctrine cannot be preserved either.

Luther: Galatians Commentary (1531) commenting on Gal. 3:19.

### Pull That Little Foot Back Under

Anyone who believes in Christ is righteous and holy by virtue of God saying so, lives—and already is—in heaven, is enveloped in the heaven of mercy. Yet while we rest in the father's lap, clothed in the finest garment imaginable, it sometimes happens that our feet come out from under that garment, and Satan seeks to bite them in whatever way he can. Like a child we kick and scream. We are still flesh and blood, and the devil is still there.

Yes, we are holy and free in faith, but not so in our flesh. We still have feet that need washing, for they are dirty, and therefore Satan is able to bite and torment us until those feet are clean. What to do? Pull that little foot back under the garment! Otherwise you will have no peace.

Luther: Third Disputation against the Antinomians (September 1538)

### One Is Your Master

In matters of faith you must build on God's word—solid and certain—so that if I myself should go crazy and recant or deny my own teaching, you would not depart from it. Instead you would say: Even if Luther himself or an angel from heaven taught something else, let that be anathema. For you must not be Luther's pupil, but Christ's. It is not enough for you to say: Luther, Peter or Paul said this. No, you must in your own conscience perceive Christ



himself as the teacher, and unwaveringly sense that it is God's word, even if the whole world fights against it. So long as you do not have that sense, you have not yet tasted God's Word. You are still "hanging your ear" on a human mouth or human pen, and not from the depths of your heart on the Word. You still do not know what Matthew 23:10 is saying. "Call no one on earth your master, for only one is your master, Christ." "The master teaches in the heart, yet does so through the external word of his preachers. They press it into the ear, but Christ presses it into the heart."

Luther: Receiving Both Kinds in the Sacrament (1522)

Promises, Promises, Promises

[And here a bunch from the final pages of Luther's Lectures on Genesis, his last major effort as Doctor in Biblia at Wittenberg University. They focus on this equation: "Gospel = Promise," sometimes also portrayed as an "Aha!" for him that was a long time coming.]

Our flesh...resists faith and the promise. It wants to be a lawyer only, not a theologian. But legal justice does not lead us into heaven. No, the promise and faith do this.

In the past, in so many churches, religious bodies and schools of higher learning, no statement or doctrine has ever been heard about the Word. Today, with the light of the gospel restored, whenever we hear the Word mentioned we understand it to be the promise. At that time...nothing at all was taught about the promises.

If you do not trust the promise, you have nothing. Through faith and the promise, however, you already possess the kingdom of God.

I certainly would have had to perish had I not been set free by God. For I knew nothing about the promises . . . . My experience was like that of the monk who was surprised that so many doctors in the papacy had never taught anything about the promise of God.

Formerly, when I was a monk it was by no means customary to speak of a promise. And I give thanks to God that I may live at this time, when this word "promise" resounds in my ears and in the ears of all the godly. Whoever hears the gospel easily understands the divine promise, which was obscure and unknown to all the theologians throughout the papacy.

But it is the chief subject of all Holy Scripture to know and understand God when he makes a promise.

Fear and faith should exist in the hearts of men, because a promise and faith, like a threat and fear, are correlative. There is no promise if faith is not present; and, on the other hand, there is no faith without a promise.

The promises of God call for faith and these two, faith and the promises, are correlatives. For without a promise we cannot believe and without faith the promise amounts to nothing and is abolished.

The histories of these Old Testament saints should be preferred to all chronicles of the achievements of Hannibal, Scipio, and Alexander the Great. Although these chronicles were held in high esteem among Greek and Latin authors, they are by no means to be compared to these. For they lack this glory of a divine quality; they have no promise.

[Luther is frequently arguing with other interpreters of the book of Genesis—both Christian and Jewish theologians—whom he thinks misread the Hebrew text. Over and over again his major complaint is: “they pay no attention to the promises.”]

The scholastics have enveloped the text of the Bible and the altogether beautiful light of the promises in horrible darkness, so that no one could understand or know the doctrine concerning Christ and his kingdom.

But we have the promises. [Luther cites four texts from the Psalms.] On these promises we rely and we are confident that God has been reconciled to us and hears our sobs and prayers.

### **A few tidbits from more recent voices:**

- II. THE PLATZREGEN IN MADAGASCAR [From a retired (but not really!) pastor in Chicago] June 7, 2007 Yesterday we returned from places afar, including Madagascar. Amazing . . . stuff like going to a Antananarivo Lutheran congregation at 6:15 a.m. on Pentecost Sunday morning and finding the place already packed out for the 6:30 Service – 3500 people in the sanctuary and more gathering outside, ready for Lutheran liturgy, hymns, Eucharist, good sermon (I got it via translation from a lady sitting next to us) and space in the 3 hour service for casting out demons. That was the first Pentecost Sunday service; the second followed at 11 and # 3 at 3 p.. Pentecost Monday is also celebrated – 189 confirmed, 29 baptized, and 11 weddings. There are things happening among Lutherans in Madagascar...
- III. A “JUSTICE” AHA!—AND THEN A BETTER OFFER? Dear Ed,  
Your letter to the editor of The Lutheran [ThTh469] is overly long, as you pointed out. You could have been more

succinct if you just pointed out that a Kingdom of God, with “a world of peace and justice” would not be much fun for God. Because to fulfill the “justice” part, all of us would be in hell, and God would be all on his lonesome. But it would be “peaceful” with all that emptiness.

Really, my dear, give it up. The Lutherans left you a long time ago. Come on over to the Presbyterian Church in America. Theologically, you’re already pretty much there, in a scary sort of way. LOL John Knox was really a fun kinda guy.

Fondly, Your armchair lady-theologian in Mississippi

IV. ANOTHER “CHRISTIAN MESSAGE” AND THE VIRGINIA TECH MASSACRE[For the VTU conversation we’ve had recently, a Lutheran pastor, now retired after decades in campus ministry, just sent in this 304-word homilette. His addenda to the original Christian Message that was offered at the University’s convocation the day after the massacre are in CAPS.]

We gather this afternoon for many purposes: to weep for lost friends and family, to mourn our lost innocence, to walk forward in the wake of unspeakable tragedy. We gather to share our hurts and our hopes, our petitions and our prayers. We gather also to drink deeply of religious streams which have refreshed parched peoples for generations. We gather together...Weeping, oh yes, we weep with sighs too deep for words, out of inexpressible pain-but also affirming the sovereignty of life over death.

CHRISTIANS THROUGHOUT THE WORLD JUST CELEBRATED THAT VICTORY ON EASTER. THE RESURRECTION OF JESUS CHRIST THAT FIRST EASTER MORNING WAS GOD’S PROCLAMATION THAT DEATH DOES NOT HAVE THE FINAL WORD. ALL THE GOOD FRIDAYS OF THE

WORLD CAN NEVER BE THE FINAL WORD. THERE IS LIFE AND HOPE BEYOND DEATH AND DESPAIR. GOD'S LIGHT IN CHRIST ULTIMATELY OVERCOMES ALL DARKNESS.

At a time such as this the darkness of evil seems powerful indeed. It casts a pall over our joys, joys as simple as a glorious spring day on the drill field. Yet we come to this place to testify that the light of love can not finally be defeated. Amid all our pain, GOD'S light shines in the darkness and darkness has not overcome it. We can not do everything, BUT WITH GOD'S HELP we can do something. We can not banish all darkness but we can, by joining together, TRUSTING GOD'S PROMISES, push it back. We can not undo yesterday's tragic events, but we can sit in patient silence with those who mourn. As we share GOD'S light, one with another, we can reclaim our campus. Let us deny death's power to rob us of all that we have loved about Virginia Tech. Let us cast our lot with GOD'S PROMISE OF hope in defiance of despair.