

# Using the Double Dipstick Test on Whether the Church Should Speak Out on Social Issues

Colleagues,

This week's Thursday theologian is Timothy Hoyer, pastor of Gloria Dei congregation (ELCA) in Lakewood, New York. A Seminex grad, Timothy has been pastoring ever since he got his sheepskin in 1982. That's 25 years already. He's hooked on the Augsburg Aha! as the best way to get to what's really "good" and genuinely "new" about THE Good News. He's also committed to that strand of Christian theology as genuinely relevant in the rough and tumble daily lives of Gloria Dei parishioners today. Timothy has produced a number of prior ThTh postings, as well as text studies posted by the Crossings Community.

For this post Timothy takes one of the Seminex code-words, "double dipstick," and uses it to test the habit of American denominations to "make statements" about social issues. I think it was some Seminex student who coined the term "double dipstick" for Philip Melanchthon's habit—especially in the Apology to Article 4 of the Augsburg Confession—of regularly testing any and all segments of the church's tradition with two questions:

1. do the merits and benefits of Christ get used or don't they?
2. do these benefits actually get across (make a "crossing") to the needy folks for whom Christ intended them?

A negative answer on either side of this double-dipstick, and that piece of the tradition is in trouble.



Here's how Timothy runs the test on the church creating social statements.

Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder

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*Jesus, crucified and risen, gives us benefits, great benefits-forgiveness from God, righteousness from God, and eternal life with God. Jesus commissioned those who trust him to use those benefits. Those benefits are to be used to benefit people, that is, give them faith in Jesus. That is the double dipstick-to not waste the benefits of Christ, and to use them so that people are comforted in their conscience.*

*Do social statements by the church 1) use the benefits of Jesus 2) to comfort people in their relationship with God?*

*No, social statements do not pass either part of the double dipstick test.*

*Social statements are about living in the "Creator's orderings"-in family, in a country, in business, in a marriage, and in any encounter with another person. The ELCA has social statements on abortion, church in society, the death penalty, economic life, the environment, health and healthcare, peace, and race, ethnicity and culture. In process are statements about education and sexuality.*

*The Promise of Christ is not about those issues. The Promise of Christ is to make new the heart, the conscience, a person's relationship with God. Forgiveness cannot guide a woman whose pregnancy is life-threatening. Forgiveness cannot guide economic policies because forgiveness and the minimum wage and*



trade treaties have nothing in common. Forgiveness does not affect the ozone layer or the production of carbon dioxide from burning fossil fuels. And forgiveness from Christ does not determine one's race, one's ethnicity, or what kind of music one's culture has.

Thus, the Promise of Christ cannot be used to make social statement, failing the first part of the double dipstick test.

Since social statements are about the creator's orderings, not the Promise but the law is the tool to tell people what to do. "The law tells us what we are to do. No such instruction is contained in the Gospel. On the contrary, the Gospel reveals to us only what God is doing...The Gospel makes no demands whatever" (The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel, C. F. W. Walther, p. 9).

If the Promise of Christ were used to direct members of the church and the church in society, then the Promise of Christ would be used for a purpose it was not meant for. The Promise of Christ is to use the benefits of Christ so that they benefit the hearers. To use Christ to direct behavior or as a guide or as the grounding for a social statement, then the Promise will be transformed into law. Words like "should," "ought," and "must" will be used.

When the Promise of Christ is transformed into law, then it is no longer of any benefit to people in their relationship with God. Instead of the Promise giving forgiveness from God and peace with God, the Promise will demand certain behaviors. And unless those behaviors are obeyed, then, and this is usually what happens, people will be told they are not Christian. Their standing before God will no longer be based on their faith in Christ but on their own behavior. C.F.W. Walther warns about this in Lecture 21 of The Proper Distinction Between Law and



Gospel when he says that love (works) must not be required for justification (pp. 222-234).

Thus, the benefits of Christ will not be used to comfort people's consciences in their relationship with God, failing the second part of the double dipstick test.

What causes Christians to form rules about what they should do? What urges the church to make social statements?

The urge to make social statements is the Old Person's desire to DO something, to do what is right and to feel good about doing what is right. To feel good is really to feel good before God on the basis of doing right instead of feeling good before God because of what Christ has done. To do what is right is to use the law to define what is right to God instead of using the Gospel to define what is right to God. That is to trust the law instead of trusting Christ for the definition of what is right to God.

For example, a pastor visited at a nursing home, shared the Lord's Supper with one resident and helped another resident, new to the facility, understand where and how she is given spending money so she can have some cash in her purse. The pastor walked to his car and felt good about the work he had done in his visit. Which visit did he feel good about? He felt good about the visit in which he helped the new resident with her finances. Such work made him feel useful, that he had done some good.

That good feeling is what motivates the church to make social statements. The church wants to be relevant, to do something worthwhile, to change for the better how its members live their lives in society. Society always needs to be corrected and to be directed to help the weak and the poor.



*That motivation to feel good, the motivation to tell others what is right, is presumptuous. It presumes God's lawful authority. For the church to make social statements is nothing else than the church using the law in what is often and wrongly called the third use of the law. The third use of the law is to take the law's function of preserving peace and restraining evil, a function meant for the "lawless and disobedient, for the godless and sinful, for the unholy and profane" (1 Timothy 1.9) and think that it is now a tool of the church to guide its members, that is, believers in Christ.*

*For the church to use the law to guide its members is to not have faith in Christ as the guide. Also, to use the law as a guide has results that the church is forgetting, namely, that the law increases sin, the law brings wrath-God's and our own at God-it causes argument, and it troubles consciences. Those results of the law are always part of the law and the church cannot whitewash the law and pretend the law does not do those things or think that such results can be separated out of the law so that the law is only a guide. "It is an extraordinary blindness and stupidity of the Antinomians to imagine that the wrath of God is something distinct from the Law. That cannot be; for the revelation of God's wrath is the Law in its operation upon the intellect and will of man. Paul expresses this fact when he says: 'The Law worketh wrath'" (The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel, p.96).*

*When the church uses the law in social statements, then it will increase sin. St. Paul wrote, "The law increases sin." Walther wrote that the law tells people what to do but does not empower them to do it, "it rather causes us to become more unwilling to keep the Law. True, some treat the law as if it were a rule in arithmetic. However, let the Law once force its way into a person's heart, and that heart will strain with all its force against God. The person will become furious at God for asking*



such impossible things of him. Yea, he will curse God in his heart" (*The Distinction Between Law and Gospel*, p. 14). Secondly, the law shows people their sins, which a social statement would do, revealing how people are not doing what the church (God) wants them to do. People outside the church, if they are told what the church says about an issue in a social statement, will only hear what they are doing wrong. They will feel judged. They will think that the church, always issuing social statements, always telling people what to do, is always condemning them. They will avoid the church in order to avoid being judged. So social statements will keep people out of the church.

And, again, the person outside the church will be told what to do but not be given any power to do what the social statement suggests. "The good I want to do I do not do," wrote Paul, attributing his inability to do good to sin within him. Since people do not want to and cannot do what the church directs them to, they will stay away from the church because of guilt.

For example, if a denomination says that remarriage after divorce is not allowed, what do people do? They go to another denomination to get married.

Or people outside the church will agree with the social statements and join the church because the church teaches what is right and teaches what the Bible says. People will think because they agree with the social statements and act in agreement with them, that they are right before God. They become "secure sinners."

Werner Elert, in *The Christian Ethos*, gives another example of how the Gospel cannot be used to guide a Christian in social issues. His story is of a ration officer, who is Christian, and has a widowed young mother in front of him, along with her



children. His heart is moved by love (the Gospel) to help her and give her all she needs. For love is generous. But he must reject his feelings and follow the rules of rationing because of all the other people, with needs just as great, are standing in line behind her. Thus, reason (law) must handle social issues.

Lastly, another result of social statements (law) is that they cause quarrels. Christians in their piety want to do what pleases God. They feel urged to stand up for what God wants and to insist that God's ways be obeyed. So, if they do not agree with a social statement, they will argue against it. They will form groups to work against it. Or they will leave the church because the church is not teaching what's in the Bible. The law, that is, social statements, will cause dissension, arguments, and parties for and against the issue. Unity in the church will be based, not on faith in Christ, but on one's opinion about a social issue. Paul warns Titus, "But avoid stupid controversies, genealogies, dissensions, and quarrels about the law, for they are unprofitable and worthless" (Titus 3.9).

"Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose" (1 Cor 1.10). Although Paul addressed the Christians about their boasting of who baptized whom, the root of boasting-I'm better than you are before God-is the same boasting that happens when people insist they are right and others wrong about a social issue.

Paul told Timothy to teach in agreement with the Lord Jesus Christ, that is, forgiveness in his name. It is when people teach something that does not agree with forgiveness (social statements disagree because they are law) that there will "come



envy, dissension, slander, base suspicions, and wrangling among those who are depraved in mind and bereft of the truth, imagining that godliness is a means of gain" (1 Timothy 6.4-5). "Imagining that godliness (doing what is right according to a social statement) is a means of gain" is to trust the law for righteousness instead of Christ.

Social statements do cause "enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions" (Galatians 5.20) which Paul calls "works of the flesh" (v. 19). If social statements cause such quarrels, are they works of the flesh?

Besides, in Acts, Paul and the new Christian church agree that the laws (social statements) do not have to be followed in order for one to be a Christian. Christians are to remember the poor, which Paul was already willing to do.

Christians are commissioned as ambassadors for Christ, speaking what Christ has given them to speak, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you shall be saved." Jesus breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit, if you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained" (John 20.22-23). The church's job is to proclaim the Promise of Christ. The Promise of Christ issues no order for what people must do. The Promise of Christ only gives people what Christ has already done. The Promise issues no orders, no demands, and no social statements.

Timothy Hoyer

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# Crossing the Word of God with the “Work” of Zion Lutheran’s Church Council

Colleagues,

Marie and I have been away from St. Louis for three weeks—and nobody seems to have noticed. But now we’re back home and I want to tell you what we did on our early spring “vacation.” Some of it was work. Trigger for the adventure was an email from Dick Lanoue, now of York PA, council member at Zion Lutheran congregation there. Couple months ago Dick remembered his involvement with Crossings courses and a workshop too back in the days when I and blessed Bob Bertram were doing both. At that time he was a US Air Force veteran pilot of the mega C-141 transports, stationed at Scott Air Force Base in Illinois just across the Mississippi River from St. Louis. Of course, he couldn’t tell us what he was really doing, but we could surmise. It was Iran-Contra time, CIA cloak-and-dagger days.

For his own self-crossing essay in one of the courses Dick chose the dicey topic “Can I be a Christian and do what I’m doing in the Air Force at the same time?” One resource he worked through in that study was Luther’s own provocative essay: “Can Soldiers be Saved?” Dick may well be an armchair theologian, but definitely not the sedentary sort—neither then nor now.

Bit by the Crossings bug back then, he never got over it. Now retired in York PA he rattles my chain early in this New Year and asks if I myself might come out of mothballs and lead a CROSSINGS retreat with the Council at Zion Lutheran, his home parish. “We’re a fast-growing congregation. Much of our council’s time is devoted to nuts-and-bolts management and



finance. We need some theology. How about a variation of the 'old' Crossings weekend workshops 'Word of God and My Daily Work'? But this time 'Word of God and our Work on the Council'?"

I couldn't say no. So first weekend of March Marie and I drove out there. The task: Friday evening and most of Saturday with the church council, a dozen or so folks and the two pastors. Then four times preaching—one Saturday evening and three times Sunday morning. A bit of a stretch for one gerontologically challenged, but grace prevailed.

The artifacts from the weekend you can see below.

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## **Church Council Retreat Zion Lutheran Church, York PA**

**FRIDAY EVENING 7 to 9 p.m.**

### **FIRST HOUR**

Devotions, Introductions

Prelude:

Dick Lanoue has sold you on having me here. Here's the reason, I think, why he did this. Dick & I (and others) got involved in CROSSINGS years ago when he lived in Metro St. Louis. Where I still live now—36 yrs already.

We did Crossings, a three-step sequence for linking the Christian Scriptures to our own daily life—our life in church & our life out in the world.

The action proceeded in three steps. We did what at that time was called "Case studies." First a Biblical case—one of the readings that was to show up in Sunday worship. Studying that



text was what we called GROUNDING.

Second we did a case study from today, a slice-of-life from the 20th century. We called that TRACKING. Often we took that slice-of-life right from one of the folks in the class, one brave enough to let us interview her on what's going on in her own personal case-study. Most often we focused on people's daily work. "Sally, what do you do all day that makes you tired by the time the day is over? What do you get from your daily work? What's the best thing, what's the worst thing, about your daily work? When it's all said and done, where does it get you?"

Step three was tying the two case-studies together, having them intersect each other—the Biblical case-study and Sally's case-study. That was the payoff of the process. We called that CROSSING.

*For our retreat this weekend I propose using the same three-step matrix. But start with the TRACKING. (So I get to know you folks ASAP.) "Tracking my own slice-of-life as Church Council member at Zion Lutheran Church, York PA."*

Then go to GROUNDING. A look at all three Biblical readings in the lectionary for this coming Sunday, the Second Sunday in Lent. The ancient name for this Sunday is "Reminiscere" (Remember Sunday).

The three texts for Reminiscere this year are these:

- A. Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18 God's unique covenant with Abraham. Key term: PROMISE.
- B. Philippians 3:17 – 4:1 Imitating the apostle – Paul claims dual citizenship, travels with two PASSPORTS.
- C. Luke 13:31-35 Jesus weeping over Jerusalem: "I desired to gather your children as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing." The imPOSSIBLE PROPHET,



the POULTRY metaphor. [I'm hooked on all those "P" words.]

Finally we'll tie the case studies together, CROSSING your individual case studies as Council members with the Biblical case studies.

OK, here we go. First off write out your own personal answers to the questions on this printout.

"TRACKING my own slice-of-life on the Church Council of Zion Lutheran Church, York PA."

1. What's my calling in Zion Luth. congregation? ["Job" description (your own version). Use verbs—"To do this, and to do that."]
2. When I focus on the fact that it is God (not just Zion members) who is calling me to this work, what—what all—is God asking me to do in addition to what's mentioned in #1 above? Use verbs.
3. What's the best thing (maybe even "fun" thing) for me about this calling?
4. What's the not-so-enjoyable aspect(s) of this calling?
5. If there are any items listed in #4, how do I cope with them?
6. What's the payoff in this calling—for others, for me?
7. If there had been no Jesus crucified-and-risen, would I carry out this calling any differently? [Or positively, Because Jesus crucified and risen is real, here's how that impacts my sense of calling at Zion.]
8. If there is one place where I think I could use some help in this calling at Zion Lutheran, it would be:

*[I asked council member to be as self-revealing as they considered proper. No one but me would see their papers, for I intended to take them home that evening and read through them and return them to their authors next morning. That is what*



*happened.]*

## **FRIDAY EVENING SECOND HOUR**

We walked/talked our way through the three lectionary texts for Reminiscere Sunday 2007.

## **GROUNDING**

A. Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18 God's unique covenant with Abraham.  
Key term: PROMISE.

PROBLEM: Living without God's Promise

1. Heading toward a dead-end future
2. Fear, Despair
3. Disconnect from God
- SOLUTION: Living under God's Promise
4. God's re-connect offer: a promissory covenant
5. Abram believed God. Promises only work when trusted. Trust replaces Fear
6. Living by faith in God's promise: open future

B. Philippians 3:17 – 4:1 Imitating the apostle – Paul claims dual citizenship, travels with two PASSPORTS.

PROBLEM: Earthly citizenship, earthly passport

1. Lifestyle/mindset on this-world stuff. Consumption is God. Shame is glory
2. Enemy of Christ's cross
3. End of the line: humiliation and destruction
- SOLUTION: Heavenly citizenship, heavenly passport
4. Cross of Christ sweet-swaps sinners' destruction for transformation. Offers new citizenship. "Heavenly" living while still on earth.
5. Standing firm as Cross-trusters, appropriating the new passport
6. Imitating Paul's mindset. "Conforming" to Christ's own citizenship. Living according to the specs of



the new passport.

C. Luke 13:31-35 Jesus weeping over Jerusalem: "I desired to gather your children as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing." The imPOSSIBLE PROPHET, the POULTRY metaphor.

PROBLEM: Jerusalem chicks—winging it on your own

1. Jerusalem lives contra Jesus.
2. Not just actions, but in the will & heart. The foxy tease to trust Herod or the Pharisee-heresy.
3. Bereft of any cover under Jesus' wings, your house is deserted—by God.SOLUTION: Jesus chicks—under Jesus' wings

4. Jesus the mother-hen prophet, does not merely SPEAK the Word of God, he IS the Word of God in action. Because of this, his death is qualitatively different from earlier prophets who also died in Jerusalem.

His Good Friday (and Easter) gathers Jerusalem-chicks, God-deserted chicks, bringing them home to the Father.

No previous martyr-prophet ever achieved that.

5. Getting under his wings.  
Trusting Jesus as "mother" hen.  
Confessing him as THE ONE who "comes in the name of the Lord."
6. Living out in the world, while still under his wings. Knowing the facts about the foxes. On the lookout for other lost chicks

## **SATURDAY MORNING. THREE ONE-HOUR SESSIONS**

### **FIRST HOUR**

"I read your personal trackings after I got home last evening. There is marvelous stuff there. I wonder if your fellow council



members have a clue of what you do. Without forcing any of you to divulge confidential matters, pick one item from your tracking page and tell your fellow council members about it.”

That took the whole first hour. In the evaluations at the end, many claimed this hour as the best hour of the weekend.

## **SECOND HOUR**

Crossing any (or all) of the three Biblical texts with what’s on the tracking pages. We did find crossing-connections for the key terms in the three texts—God’s promissory covenant, Jerusalem chicks vs. Jesus chicks, and travelling with a new passport in council work. But it didn’t have the pizzazz that the show-and-tell had had in the previous hour. So I proposed that in the final session Saturday afternoon, I would create an agenda from what I’d learned about them for a Church Council meeting. Council chairwoman Jen Lau would run the meeting, and I’d sit by and “observe” if anything we’d done in the prior sessions “crossed” over to how they handled the agenda.

## **THIRD HOUR**

Two items.

1. The issue of shared authority in congregational life surfaced. So we took some time to look at Jesus’s own authority seminar with his disciples in Matthew 20:20 ff. With hastily-crafted visuals we contrasted the “point-up” pyramids of authority in normal human institutions together with Jesus’ caveat “it shall not be so among you,” and the upside-down pyramid of the Son of Man’s authority and of his followers. Granted, that authority model entails “giving your life for others.” But the other way is a sure loser on its own. So you pick the best way to “lose your life.” With him and his gospel, he promises,



you do indeed lose, but there's an Easter after your Good Friday.

2. We spent the last half of the hour reading through the 3-page "Care and Redemption of God's Creation" essay archived on the Crossings webpage under "Works of EHS." My goal was to help them look beyond their church council callings to all their other callings, which I'd now heard about after our hours together, and see how they fit under the rubrics of that offertory prayer: "We dedicate our lives to the care and redemption of all that you, God, have made."

We then broke for lunch.

## **SATURDAY AFTERNOON**

Chairwoman Jen ran the council meeting. Now sitting on the sidelines, I had fun seeing where crossings did indeed occur. They were not play-acting as they went about the "business" of Zion congregation. Yes, budgetary matters, personnel matters, seem always to be "point-up pyramid" realities, but they are not "just" that. To address them only in that way falls under Christ's own caveat: "it shall not be so among you." We have to work at laying the upside-down pyramid over the point-up pyramid stuff in congregational life. That's seldom easy to do. But that's clearly Christ's specs for Zion Lutheran. We've got a promise to trust while doing it, a new passport for our authorization, and a Mother Hen clucking encouragement for us to keep on keeping on.

After council meeting adjournment we had a final swing around the big table for response to: what did you expect from the retreat? What did you get? Comments were such that they let me stick around to do the quadruple-header homily that evening and the next morning.



Peace and Joy!  
Ed Schroeder

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# The Elephant in the Sanctuary

Ed received this sermon from an interim pastor and wanted to pass it on to you. Peace,  
Robin

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*Grace, mercy and peace to you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. I've been standing in this pulpit for almost eight months now. Truthfully, sometimes it seems like forever and sometimes it seems like merely the blink of an eye. Sometimes I have desperately wanted to drive up the highway and never come back. Sometimes I wish I could stay forever, which I can't.*

*But one thing is sure and constant in all my emotional swinging back and forth. I've come to love this congregation.*

*We've gone through three phases of my preaching – in the beginning you were hurting so much that I focused on comfort. The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. Jesus gives us his peace. Let yourself rest in the Lord's arms.*

*But comfort isn't the only aspect of healing. An infected wound needs the dirty old bandage taken off and the wound needs to be*



*cleaned out. And that hurts. Some of you weren't too happy with me during that time. You didn't like what I was saying nor how I was saying it, which makes perfect sense because it hurt and you didn't want to hurt anymore.*

*For the last couple of months, between my family responsibilities and the holidays, I've preached more traditionally. I spoke about giving thanks for all God's given us, anticipating with open hearts and hands the coming of God-with-us, celebrating the birth of the Christ child. I decided that any further movement in the transition process could wait for the New Year.*

*Well, it's 2007 now.*

*We've been through some things together. You've seen me in good times and hard times. I hope that by my actions and my words I've conveyed to you how much I care about you. So that now, when we look at some hard things again, I hope we can be open with each other. Talk to me. Let's sit down together and talk as the people we are – individual members of Christ's body who are bound together ETERNALLY by our baptisms through the Holy Spirit.*

*This week I've come to realize, in listening to you in various situations that we've cleaned out the wound, but it's still there. It makes me think of my uncle who, to this day, wears an ace bandage on his leg over a wound he received in WWII that never goes away. It's not infected, but the open wound is still there.*

*This congregation was born in conflict. From the beginning you've had "us versus them" factions. I don't know the earliest ones, but recent ones included: for the pipe organ versus against the pipe organ, wanted to move to the new location versus didn't want to move to the new location, for*



*homosexuality versus against homosexuality. And the one that I believe is starting to surface now – the “we need to get back to normal versus we need to do something new” conflict.*

*In the middle of all this “us versus them” conflict blame starts to fly – it’s the pipe organ committee’s fault, it’s the Synod’s fault, it’s Churchwide’s fault.*

*And depending on your personality type, you start fighting with each other or you run.*

*The truth is that when there’s an “us versus them” problem on the surface, underneath there’s also a Jesus problem. What are you hanging your hearts on, what are you trusting, when any conversation about money or calling a new pastor sends you right back to your corners either fighting and blaming or running and blaming? I don’t know what you’re trusting, but I do know that you’re not trusting the Good News of Jesus Christ.*

*And what does the end of our Gospel lesson say Jesus does when people reject him? “He walked right through the crowd and went on his way.” Jesus walks away.*

*Listen to Jesus’ mission statement again:*

*God’s Spirit is on me; he’s chosen me to preach the Message of good news to the poor, sent me to announce pardon to prisoners and recovery of sight to the blind, to set the burdened and battered free, to announce, This is God’s year to act!*

*WE ARE the poor who need to hear the Good News*

*WE ARE the prisoners who need pardon*

*WE ARE the blind who need our sight restored*

*WE ARE the battered and burdened who need to be set free.*

*Sisters and brothers, we CANNOT free ourselves. This “us versus them” scenario that plays out over and over again in this*



congregation is your elephant in the sanctuary just like alcoholism is the elephant in the living room of so many homes. The first step toward true peace is admitting that you are powerless to change it. Your addiction to conflict is stronger than you are. It's a spiritual disease that needs a spiritual cure.

Jesus says to us all:

The Spirit of God is on me

Jesus says, I have been chosen to be Good News for you

Jesus says, I have been sent to tell you that your sins have been pardoned by my death on the cross

Jesus says, I have been sent to give you back your sight

Jesus says, I have been sent to set you free

Jesus says, I am here to tell you, This is God's year to act in this congregation!

Can you trust that Jesus is speaking to you? To You, individually, and To You, as a congregation? To You, Today?

That's what he's longing for us to do. To open our hearts and minds and hands to him, admitting we've got a problem that we can't fix and laying it down at the foot of his cross.

We need to have a service of repentance, a time to gather together, admit our addiction to conflict and turn back toward Jesus, trusting that he will care for us and carry us forward, HE will give us a way to be God's people in this place even if that instinct for conflict is still here. No matter what that future looks like, Jesus Christ will walk with us from this moment forward and throughout all of eternity.

We need to have a time like we see in our first lesson in Nehemiah where God's people came together after their captivity and time in exile to renew their relationship with God and re-



*commit themselves to being God's people in that place.*

*But I'm not going to initiate such a service, it's got to come from you. And I need a representative from both sides of the "we need to get back to normal versus we need to do something new" divide to come to me and ask for it. Otherwise, it'll be a waste of time and make the conflict worse.*

*Until you come to grips with the reality of this congregational instinct for conflict, realizing that only through Christ will there ever be true peace here, it's not going to matter what your budget is, who your pastor is, or what your vision statement says. You'll just go around and around on the conflict merry-go-round until you run out of money or people or both.*

*The Creator of the Universe loves you so much that He sent His Son to teach you and heal you, die and be raised to new life so that you can be set free and see the greatness of what God in Christ is doing for YOU.*

*THIS IS GOD'S YEAR TO ACT!*

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## **Reflections on the 2007 Crossings Conference, Part 2**

Colleagues,

Some more comments from conference-goers. Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder



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*I was at the Crossings Conference and I was pleased with the focus on hermeneutics and the proclamation of law and gospel rather than on effecting social change. Referring to the participant you quote in the letter this week I will say that "Faith as a transformative force in the world" is not the same thing as "the church speaking out on global warming, social justice and immigration reform."*

*Ed, I have strong feelings about this topic, but I've never been able to successfully express them without scandalizing some other followers of Jesus. I know this because I tried to a few times during the conference. And, unless I believe myself to be a prophet (and I do not) then there will come a time when I must submit humbly to the sense of the Community.*

*However, I am not yet sufficiently humble to do that.*

*Allow me to say a few things that on later reflection I may judge to have gone off the deep end.*

*This world before the parousia will never be a place of justice, mercy or peace. All I, or the church, ask of God in this world is a space in which repentance and the Gospel may be proclaimed. The purpose of the Church is not to work for social justice or for peace in the way the world understands these things. Our mandate is to show the world Christ crucified and to petition the Spirit that all may soon be recapitulated in Jesus Christ. It is in that recapitulation, that "re-heading" of all creation in Jesus Christ, that we understand Peace and Justice will arrive.*

*Our attempts to comfort, feed and clothe the miserable will never be more than palliative. Ultimately, outside of Jesus Christ, all comfort, food and protection fail. It is the*



world's task to offer these temporary solutions, it is ours to offer eternal ones.

*"Transformative faith is a force in the world" because such faith is the work of the Spirit using Word and Sacraments to bring the whole of creation to new life in Jesus Christ.*

*The church appropriately ministers in the world by comforting, feeding and clothing when it uses that ministry as way of pointing to the ultimate healing granted us in Jesus Christ. This is the way that our Lord himself used such ministry. And so, in these ministries the name of Jesus must always be elevated. However, the resources of the church in this world are finite, and ultimately they must be focused on proclaiming the forgiveness of sin for Jesus' sake.*

*I know from experience that some brothers and sisters will disagree with this, and I gratefully accept their correction. I hope at a minimum we might agree on the following: "The purpose of the Church is not to work for social justice or for peace in the way the world understands these things. Our mandate is to show the world Christ crucified and to petition the Spirit that all may soon be recapitulated in Jesus Christ."*

*Ed, the above words seem disjointed to me which is a sure sign that my thoughts are also. I don't expect a response from you, I suspect your correspondence load is heavy enough!*

*I write especially to thank you for the work you and the committee put into preparing the Conference. If another is offered I will surely try to attend.*

*Bob Boudewyns  
Altoona, Iowa*



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*I guess I'm not surprised that someone was unhappy in the way you described. And, since I was one of the speakers, I shouldn't be one of those who responds, since it would smack of self-justification.*

*If I were to respond, however, I'd simply say that this was a conversation about law and gospel, not a gathering of prophets, politicians, or social action strategists.*

*The organizers didn't invite politicians or social action strategists. That prophets didn't show up is God's doing, I presume. God calls and sends prophets. Self-proclaimed prophets are all over the place, and they usually make plenty of noise and get abundant attention. I have no clue why self-proclaimed prophets failed to show up or seek a hearing at Our Lady of Snows.*

*I would also guess that many people in attendance at the conference are active in organized as well as personal efforts to address issues of injustice, racism, hunger, etc., and they all work at transformation. However, they didn't feel a need to speak of that, given the nature of the occasion.*

*So, there's my two-cents worth—and more evidence of how much a churchly misfit I am.*

*Blessings!*

*Fred Niedner*

*Theology Department*

*Valparaiso University*

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*I guess I agree that the emphasis was not on world transformation, but that was OK as in my view the session*



descriptions never suggested there would be. However, I felt that Joe Strelan's keynote was a start along those lines, as was his break-out more of the same. I got what I came for—a deeper understanding of the Diagnosis-Prognosis/6 step process for text unpacking. I would have appreciated more of the crossing part you did with Sherm. Another of those would have been a great bonus.

The only real downside was what appeared to me to be a limited understanding of Islam. Not so much in your Crossing, Ed, but in the questions raised/answers given. I checked on the book that was held up, Abraham's Children, and it's a bit pricey for me. There's a similar, but less expensive, book that has Joan Chittister as one of the authors, so I may get that one. If you ever hold a conference in Dearborn, MI, I promise some expertise will be available. You may be aware that we have a mission ELCA church in Dearborn these days. I hope to take your Crossing to Pastor Rani and discuss it with him.

I think, also, that the firehose approach to the session about the "New Paul" was way too much. I absorbed nothing from that.

In summary, as a SAM [=Synodically Authorized Minister] from the SE Mich Synod, I was thrilled to be with all of you. The location and general organization were fabulous. I have already sent my thanks to Cathy on that front. I hope there are more, and I do look forward to the on-line plans. Hope we'll be kept apprised of implementation status now and then.

One other small point. It was great to celebrate the Eucharist, and I wonder if there was any difficulty getting permission, given the RC venue. When Bishop Schreiber was installed here in SEMI the local RC leadership would not allow our communion in their building. I also believe the same reception was given by the local LCMS folks. We ended up in a Methodist church.



# Reflections on the 2007 Crossings Conference

Colleagues,

I asked for participant reflections on the Honest-to-God Gospel conference we had here last month. A few folks responded. Some told me that they already did so on the Crossings Conference blog. Here are some items that came back to me. I also offer my own comments on their comments. Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

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**A-1.** *Comment received: "Some of the speakers were pretty high falutin in their presentations. Why not have two tracks at the next such Crossings conference—one for preacher-theologian types, one for the rest of us."* **A-2.** *Comment on the comment: I offer a caveat for moving toward two tracks in future Crossings stuff.*

**Major caveat:** *No Biblical book ever does that. Even egghead-theologian-and-missionary St. Paul does not offer egg-head epistles for the pros, nickel-word epistles for the peasants. Most often it's the eggheads (priests, kings, church leaders)*



who don't yet understand the nickel words of God. Some other thoughts:

1. "Two-tracks Crossings" contradicts the commitment of the ancient founding duo NOT to do that. We figured if we can help the common folks understand and do theology, make crossings from Biblical groundings to their own slice-of-life trackings, then MAYBE, just maybe, the clergy in the audience will catch on too.
2. Crossings did indeed from the outset seek to do "systematic" theology, but systematic theology as "theology that's patently useful for ministry."
3. That's really "practical" theology. Theology that's eminently able to be put into praxis. Methinks that ought to be the dipstick for ongoing Crossings programs and projects. Really the old double-dipstick: making use of Christ's benefits, benefitting the folks whom Christ himself wants to benefit.
4. If some presenters at the gathering were mostly doing academics and didn't pass the test of #2 & 3 above, they maybe shouldn't have been on the program with those topics.
5. Yes, Rudolf Keller, as most folks speaking their non-native language, wasn't always easy to understand. My hunch is that the greatest difficulty—for lay and clergy alike who commented—was his speaking in his own slow English with occasional "German" pronunciations of English words. And he is indeed a German professor. But when you read his English text, it is not egg-heady at all. Solid, yes, and it's got marvelous narrative flow. Marie and I were constantly thinking of non-seminary grads as we translated his German text. I had my own reason for recommending him to the program-planners. I wanted the current generation of Crossings folks to



see/hear/learn of the Elert historical roots of Crossings—of the Gospel Aha!—and to hear that “live” from a German insider to the Elert heritage.

6. In Keller’s text he presents Elert as one following the rubrics of #2 and #3 above. Systematic theology (or dogmatics) always in service to the church’s proclamation. Scholarly, yes, and possibly not everybody’s cup of tea all the time, but still in the end it passes the double-dipstick measure.
7. Bob Schultz calls attention to the final paragraphs on “Holy Scripture” in Elert’s dogmatics that links to this. Here’s a translation that he and I have scissors-and-pasted together: Elert, *Der Christliche Glaube*, 1st edition, 1940, p. 238

Every text-interpreter presupposes “understanding,” i.e., that the interpreter and the text-author are on the same wave-length with their presuppositions of earthly existence. Under this rubric the documents of the NT can also be interpreted by someone not a member of the Christian church. And vice versa, the theological interpreter must be concerned for the same inner solidarity with the Biblical author as interpreters of non-Biblical texts are with the authors they are interpreting. The first question both need to answer is: WHAT did the author “mean.”

It becomes “theological” interpretation when the text is understood as God’s Word. This happens when the readers or listeners—and therefore Biblical scholars too—hear that Word of God personally speaking to them. To understand the Holy Scriptures we must not only show WHAT the text means, but WHO is meant by the text, namely, no one else but the readers and the interpreters themselves. The readiness to acknowledge oneself as “meant” by the



text is called "faith."

*In other words: Exegetes understand scripture correctly only when they are willing to submit themselves to the Lord who is speaking here, i.e., to acknowledge, from the very texts that they seek to understand, God's own verdict on themselves.*

*[Just in case our English may still need "a little work," I offer an RSP, a Revised Schroeder Paraphrase.]*

*All interpreters seek to "understand" the texts they are working on. So Biblical interpreters do so too. But when you are interpreting the Bible, the subject matter you are working on is the Word of God. And that makes a difference from all other similar scholarly/academic pursuits in interpreting texts.*

*Yes, in both cases you handle your study material as "objectively" as you can, apart from personal prejudices. Yet no matter how "objective" you seek to be in your work and study of that Word of God—keeping a proper "neutral" distance—that very Word of God is also speaking to you about yourself. "Hey, theologian, I'm talking about YOU! Even more, I'm talking TO you." That doesn't happen for paleontologists or mathematicians. Dinosaurs don't make personal claims on the folks digging up their fossil remains; likewise numbers don't do that to the ones who are crunching them. Elert's claim: Bible scholars who ignore that God is also talking to them personally are not being "faithful" to their subject matter. Thus they're not being good interpreters of their material from a scholarly/academic angle.*

8. *Them's my druthers about Crossings-two-tracks. Let other outfits pursue the mostly egghead assignment. Is there*



even such a thing in Christian theology? Maybe so. But Crossings' Articles of Incorporation go in the nickel-words direction.

**B-1.** Comment received: Someone voiced dismay that the conference presentations and discussions gave scant attention to "the church speaking out on critical public issues."

**B-2.** My thoughts: As soon as you say "Shouldn't the church speak out on x, y or z?" –so it seems to me—you have to figure out the following:

1. WHO speaks for THE church? Is it the pope? The ELCA presiding bishop? Episcopal bishop Robinson? The Archbishop of Canterbury? Some study commission? Whose study commission? Your local pastor? Grandma Schmidt? This is not a trivial question. For the speaker-outers regularly don't agree. Christians already in the NT era didn't always agree. It's no different now. So who speaks for THE church? Why not Grandma Schmidt, possibly even in preference to the Pope? But that pushes a further question:
2. Why in the NT is there NEVER any reference to, any mandate from, Jesus or the apostles that THE CHURCH should speak out on issues? That's in none of the mission mandates in the NT. Was the first century A.D. already the kingdom of God on earth, and thus it was unnecessary? Hardly. Did the apostolic writers miss something—that we latter day saints have now discovered? Maybe. But then again, maybe not.
3. Why, for what theological reason, does Luther NEVER talk this way? Was he a wimp? 'Course not. My conviction: His ecclesiology—Gospel-grounded, he was convinced—rendered it impossible for him to recommend any such thing. [The Crossings web site has some stuff on that. One example:



*"A Second Look at the Gospel of Mark – Midway in the Year of Mark." Click on "Writings of EHS." It's the 4th one on that list.]*

- 4. If one is speaking for THE CHURCH, you are speaking for the Church's HEAD. That's where the mouth is. Why does the HEAD of the body of Christ never give such an assignment to his disciples anywhere in the 4 gospels? They are never given a "prophetic" mandate. Au contraire. Their vocal assignment is something else. So whence this conviction that THE church should be the Amos or Hosea to society today? Until such WHY questions are answered, and answered substantively, methinks we ought to go slow with such conviction that THE church should speak out on matters of God's left-hand regime. Could be that there is no authorization at all for that sort of thing from THE HEAD himself. [Which is my conviction. One sharp example: When two brothers came to Jesus asking him to adjudicate their "justice-issue" conflict (Luke 12:13), he said "Thanks, but no thanks. Not my job," and he changed the subject.] And if members of the Body are doing that sort of thing—as many denominations, today especially in the USA(!), are doing—then they are quite likely in conflict with the Head. And if that's the case, what's THE issue here that needs speaking out on?*

*Yes, the conference program didn't highlight that speaking-out agenda. I don't know if the conference planners did that on purpose, but I'd not be surprised if they did. And for theological reasons. Crossings theology—if you can call it that—has been doing theology and proposing praxis that is a "second opinion" to much of what's prevalent in the churches today, also to the habit of making "social statements." Gospel-grounded ecclesiology is different from what's widespread in American Church-ianity these days.*



*More next time.*

*Peace and Joy!*

*Ed Schroeder*

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# Speaking from the Heart

Colleagues,

Last week the bishop of the Central States Synod of the ELCA—my bishop—Gerald (“Jerry”) Mansholt was in St. Louis talking to a strange-and-wonderful bunch of Missouri Synod and ELCA pastors, local folks all sitting together around tables having lunch. The group consists of parish pastors “from both sides of the aisle.” For some years now they have been regularly “crossing the canyon” to talk shop. Last week’s invited speaker was Mansholt, who himself grew up “Missouri” in small-town rural Illinois. Jerry was in the first graduating class of Seminex (1974)—hence no longer kosher in the Missouri Synod. Now rostered in the ELCA, he held pastorates in Missouri and Kansas before becoming our bishop a few years ago. Here’s what he said.

Peace and Joy!  
Ed Schroeder

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***“From the Heart” St. Louis ELCA/LCMS Forum***



**February 14, 2007**

*Today is Valentine's Day but I don't imagine that was uppermost on your mind when you extended the invitation to me a couple of months ago. This day is one of those days popular in our culture that also may have some roots in Christian tradition. This is a day when a St. Valentine is remembered in the Roman calendar, though we don't know a whole lot about the person or persons. One website I looked at described Valentine something like this: we remember a martyr from the 3rd century for some unknown but probably good reason. The Church is built upon the faith of the apostles and the blood of martyrs; many of the latter were common, ordinary, everyday persons whose names are known today only by God in heaven. What we do know is these early Christians were of such a faith and life, they were willing to give their very lives unto death. Valentine's Day today in this culture is a day about romantic love—dinners, chocolates, flowers and those little candy hearts with cute sayings. Enough about Valentine's Day connections, except for this...*

*A few years ago one of the Deans our Area Ministries invited me to visit with pastors and lay rostered leaders. The invitation was specific in one sense. Said the Dean: don't tell us about a church program, or a vision for mission, or something coming down from church hierarchy. Tell us what you are passionate about, what's on your heart. I knew what he was driving at. He is a very fine pastor, gifted theologically, a heart bursting with care and love for people, plus a critical eye. He wanted me to speak to the heart, to feed those who were gathered, and to speak from the heart.*

*That can be dangerous, of course, because what is on my heart and yours might not be what is on the heart of God. Out of the heart flow all sorts of nasty things, Jesus tells us in the*



*Sermon on the Mount. Create in me a clean heart, O God, the psalmist says. Lift up your hearts, we say in the liturgy, knowing very well that there are days when hearts are despondent and it takes something from outside us to lift them in joy and peace. I think these are exceedingly stressful days for pastors and lay leaders in the church, but more on that later. There are things that cause our hearts to be weighed down, our hearts to be distracted, our hearts to be confused, our hearts to be compromised. So, it was good to hear the lesson from 2 Corinthians 4 recently, where Paul says, we do not lose heart. We may be shipwrecked, pained, confused, suffering in the soul, buffeted by all sorts of pressures, even challenged and opposed, but we do not lose heart. We proclaim not ourselves but Jesus Christ; the One in whose very face the light and glory of God has shone.*

*If you are sensing a theme here, you are correct. I want to speak to you today from the heart, from my heart, and, Lord, have mercy on me for even daring to speak so boldly, but about the things that are on the heart of God.*

*Now the Bible is filled with references to the human heart. When we speak about a person, about what a person is really like, we speak of what is on a person's heart. That person has a good heart; a heart of gold, a generous heart. We say we know where that person's heart really is! The heart, biblically speaking, is the seat of the will, the emotions; it is the essence of who we are as human beings. And, the heart is the point of contact with God. God addresses us in the heart, and Jesus says you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and your neighbor as well.*

*A couple of weeks ago I was with Pr. John Reigstad of Resurrection Lutheran Church walking around some of the rubble of the burned-down building. Resurrection Lutheran Church, on*



*Fair and West Florissant here in St. Louis, burned on Christmas Eve. Resurrection is the result of a merger of three congregations; the building is from the former Pilgrim Lutheran Church. I did not see the video footage as some of you did but I understand it was a traffic-stopping blaze. I'm sure some of you have been by the site; it is a total destruction.*

*Resurrection today is a small urban congregation struggling with a host of problems related to small membership, urban decay and racism and poverty. But in many respects it is not that different really from some rural congregations in north central Kansas, where population decline on the Great Plains means the main export from the community is children. They grow up and then move to where the jobs are. The result is that the median age of congregations in some places is over 70. And Resurrection isn't that different from other congregations in growing areas, where the population is booming but the congregation is declining. The population around them may be Hispanic (as in Garden City, Dodge City, and Liberal, Kansas, where the Hispanic population now is nearly 50%) or suburban white and growing by great numbers. But our congregations are declining and dying.*

*Now I truly was thinking some of these very things while walking in the debris of the burned-down building of Resurrection Lutheran Church here in St. Louis when I saw a page from the Lutheran Book of Worship, burned around the edges. I was able to determine the hymn, No. 403:*

*Lord, speak to us that we might speak  
in living echoes of your tone;  
as you have sought, so let us seek  
your straying children, lost and lone.*

*The hymn on the other side of the page, No. 402, was one less*



*familiar to me:*

*Look from your sphere of endless day,  
O God of mercy and of might,  
In pity look on those who stray  
So blindly in this land of light.*

*Send us your people, Lord, to call  
the thoughtless hardened, young and old,  
a scattered homeless flock, till all  
are gathered in your peaceful fold.*

*A week from today is Shrove Tuesday, or International Pancake Day, I recently discovered. My wife Anita and I were at IHOP [International House of Pancakes] and there saw the advertisement for free pancakes on February 20, a subtle capitalizing on Fat Tuesday, for those who have eyes to see. The folk in Liberal, Kansas will race and flip pancakes with their counterparts in Olney, England.*

*Then comes Ash Wednesday and the season of Lent. Ashes are placed upon the forehead with the sign of the cross and congregations will begin a period of renewal. Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. Ashes, signs of destruction and death. Dust you are and to dust you shall return, we say as they are applied. Maybe we should also say of ourselves and of our congregations, using the words of the liturgy for the graveside service ...in the sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life we commit our very selves to dying, earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust. The Lord bless us and keep us.*

*There are major issues before the Church in North America today, not only before us Lutherans but before the whole of Christ's Church in this culture. I hear about them all the*



time. Bishop, are we growing? How's the membership? What's happening to mission support? We are on a more-than-40-year decline of financial support for the national church, and this is true not only for the ELCA and the LCMS but for all mainline denominations. Last year alone the ELCA lost 75,000 members, more than the size of the Central States Synod. This loss was not because of large congregations leaving the church body; these are simply people drifting away, young and old.

People are quick to come up with solutions to problems. Bishop, if only you did this or did not do that. If only you used this program and modified the music and liturgy in this way. There are elements of truth in many things that are suggested but they are far from the whole truth.

I have come to the conviction that the issues before us are much deeper and they have to do with who we understand ourselves to be and what we are called to be about in the world today. At the heart of the matter are issues of identity and mission: Who are we? What are we called to do? Simply put, they are matters of the heart. And what we need in the church is not 40 days of superficial Lent, but perhaps 40 years of fasting, 40 years of wilderness struggle, 40 years of living on daily manna. We need a generational change, a rediscovery of what it means to be a people called by God, formed around the cross of Jesus, dying to the old, and becoming the Body of Christ, giving heart and soul, mind and strength in witness and service to the world.

It is an age-old problem, to be sure. Lutherans, of all people, realize theologically the depth of sin. We are in bondage to sin. We cannot free ourselves. We are blind to the truth of our lives and the ways of God. We need nothing less than a Word from outside of our life and experience to set us free. Hence, the Good News of the grace of God in Jesus Christ, who, though



we were yet sinners, even enemies of God, died for us. Christ died for our sins and has reconciled us to the God and Father of us all (Romans 5). This is the Good News that has not changed.

What has changed, so dramatically and at an increasingly rapid pace, even in our own life time, is the culture around us. It has been happening for a long period of time, going back in some respects at least to the Reformation and the beginning of denominational life. Then the formation of this country with the separation of Church and State accelerated the cultural divide.

Now a consumerist culture has hit us full throttle, with faith privatized, with individual right and value the highest good. The Gospel itself has become commodified and Christian community ever more strained and broken. I am sure you have found yourself saying: what worked yesterday doesn't work today! Something has changed, and it is not the Gospel, not the nature of Church and community. What has changed is the culture around us. This very change is causing all sorts of stress upon our life and will be forcing us more and more to deal with very basic questions: who are we and what is our mission?

Church is boring. I am amazed at how often a congregation member will say this to me at an Adult Forum: our youth think church is boring. To which I say, church is boring not only to youth but to many adults. And boredom is not cured by making the music louder! Church is boring because we have lost our way. We have little passion for mission. Too many among us do not have the foggiest notion of what biblical Christianity entails, what it means to walk in the steps of Jesus. Too many know next to nothing about the basic tenets of Lutheran theology. We are more concerned about what goes on within our own lives, our own congregation, our own denomination, than



what takes place in the community and society around us. Young people are bored because they do not know a Gospel that is worth dying for. People get bored because they think of the Gospel as a commodity to be consumed instead of a death to be experienced. They do not know a faith worth giving their life for, worth sacrificing their all.

But let any youth, young adult or older adult get engaged in faith, trust in this word of Jesus, have a heart locked into love of God and neighbor, and life is anything but boring. Then lives will be engaged and passionate. They will have all kinds of questions about faith and life. They will be risking, giving, hurting, suffering, rejoicing, hoping against all odds. But their lives won't be bored! Is life or ministry boring? Put your trust in this word addressed to us in Jesus, venture forth in faith. Trust you are reconciled and free, and have nothing to fear. Such faith transforms us and leads to giving life away in witness and service. Life then is anything but boring.

So we do not lose heart! There are days when I get down because I know we are going through some massive changes, culturally and ecclesiologically. We have more than 40 days of a wilderness through which to travel. There will be significant dying before resurrection to new life. But because of the Promise of God, we do not lose heart.

I am thankful for faithful pastors, for those who think theologically, for those who love and serve their congregations with strong leadership, for those who teach and preach. I am thankful for truth-tellers, those who tell the truth about God, and those who speak the truth of our lives. We cannot ignore the pain of the world, the suffering of the least, the hungers of the world. The challenges are great: this disastrous war in Iraq, the plight of Palestinian Christians, death in Darfur.



*But we do not lose heart. We have this treasure in earthen vessels. Each of us is but a work in progress: individually as pastors, our congregations as missional communities, our denominations as expressions of the wider Church and vehicles of global ministry. We may be cracked, tarnished, flawed, imperfect in so many ways. But we have this treasure, a pulsating, life-giving treasure, that ultimately is the hope for the world.*

*A few years ago the theme for the Lutheran World Federation Assembly was For the Healing of the World. Walter Cardinal Kasper, President of the Pontifical Council for the Promoting of Christian Unity, spoke movingly in Winnipeg of the Gospel of Jesus Christ as the healing so desperately needed by all the world. Cardinal Kasper is a delightful and humble man who radiates joy and hope. He spoke of the healing that flows from God's reconciling love in Jesus Christ; he lifted up the importance of the Joint Declaration of the Doctrine of Justification. Here is where healing begins, he said, in God's reconciling love in Jesus Christ. Here is God's gift in Jesus Christ: the healing of the heart, the healing of communities and nations, the healing of divisions among Christians and people of all faiths.*

*My friends and colleagues, do not lose heart. Stay connected with one another, especially through these days of enormous change. Keep trusting and risking and venturing forth, not knowing where all this will lead, but knowing that God is already there. Lead your people into Lent, these 40 days to come and beyond. Speak the truth to them and urge them to listen for the voice of God today.*

*The voice today is the same voice of the past. But a new context with new and different challenges means we hear the voice differently, even freshly. God, slow to anger and*



*abounding in steadfast love, is calling yet again, calling us through the Gospel of Jesus Christ. "Return," the voice says, "and claim with new vibrancy what has already been given you, a renewed heart, a renewed life and mission in the world." By the grace and mercy of God in Jesus Christ, we are the Body of Christ in the world today. "As the Father has sent me, so I send you" were the post-Easter words of Jesus to the disciples. And, the last I checked, we are still post-Easter. Christ is risen, the Spirit is empowering and gifting, and we are called to return and reclaim. We get to leave so much behind, so much in ashes of repentance. But without that burdensome baggage we travel evermore lightly and are free to be who we are: the Body of Christ sent into the world today, to serve and witness to God's reconciling love in Jesus Christ.*

*Gerald L. Mansholt*

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## **An Incarnation Narration**

Colleagues,

In the early 1950s Norman Dietz and I were seminary classmates in St. Louis. It was a five-year program. About halfway through those five years I wound up as editor of the theological journal published by the Seminary Student Association, THE SEMINARIAN. So far as I know, nobody had yet invented the term "narrative theology" in those days, but Dietz was doing it—also when he should have been working on Greek and Hebrew Bible texts. We published the first version of "Old Ymir" as the lead article in the SEMINARIAN Christmas issue, December 1953.



Dietz has been all over the map with his prose and his performances in the 50 years since then. Though just as old as I am, he's still at it. "Retirement" never got into his dictionary. He's also continued to putz and polish Old Ymir in the years since OY's debut. Since we were in cahoots with Ymir's birthing, he keeps me posted, and not long ago he sent me the latest tweaking of the text. I asked his permission to pass it on to the Crossings crowd. He said yes. With jubilation cum nostalgia I send it out as today's ThTh posting.

For direct contact with Norman, GO to his web site <http://homepage.mac.com/normandietz> There you'll learn what all he's been up to, lo, this half-century—and what he's still doing. There you can also divine how you might tease him to come to your place to do more of the same for you and your folks "live." As Immanuel Kant should have said: "There's nothing like Dietz-an-sich."

Peace & joy!

Ed Schroeder

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## **OLD YMIR'S CLAY POT**

**A Fable by Norman Dietz**

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*"OLD YMIR'S CLAY POT" is a fable about creation, destruction, and reconciliation; it is about fear and anger and forgiveness and new life. Its central images, the potter and the pot, are to be found elsewhere, of course, used in similar ways, and the name of the potter, "Ymir" – pronounced EE-meer, by the way, with the accent firmly on the first syllable – is taken from*



Norse mythology (Ymir was the giant, slain by the gods, out of whose dead body those estimable beings created the world). Everything else in the story, however, is purely of my own invention – the earliest, sketchy version of it dating back over 50 years now, to the summer of 1952.

– Norman, December 2006

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Once long ago, when the sky hung heavy with snow, and the thick, drawn clouds of dawn seemed to roll in great swells down from the mountains and out over the sea – on a morning just like that, icy and silent – old Ymir the Potter came into town.

He had skin like wrinkled leather and a thick gray beard as tough as wire. He was a head taller than any man alive and older and wiser than God himself. And though he'd probably have laughed if you'd told him, he was about to create a masterpiece.

He twisted a huge iron key in a lock choked with rust, pushed open a battered wooden door, and stepped inside a gray, stone-walled hut full of shadows and corners and years at the end of a street just three hundred-eighty-one snow-hidden paving blocks from the sea.

The cold wind rushed in behind him, and old Ymir quickly slammed the door, rattling the shelves of the small, wintry room.

Then he opened his shop.

Elbowing through the thick leather drapery that hung in the doorway, he squeaked into the workshop.

It was a sullen, ill-lit little room in the rear, full of creaking, complaining old floorboards and scarcely quite large



enough to contain the vast amount of dust and moldy smell that filled it, much less the assorted odds and ends of the potter's trade that it held besides: a rickety wheel, caked hard with old bits of clay; a large tan brick kiln, cold as death; and a table, a chair and a bed – all very thoroughly webbed and entangled by time and the spiders and dust. Old Ymir put down his pack in the center of the room and got to work. He scraped clean the potter's wheel, lighted the kiln, and cleared all the shelves and the tables and chairs of their cobwebs and dust. He swept up the floor, went off after fuel, gathered the clay, and chased all the mice from the bed. Then he hung out a sign – “Ymir, Master Maker of Pots” – rubbed his hands and began.

Day after day, old Ymir's wheel spun madly. Day after day, he molded the soft, fine clay, fashioning it as it spun. And soon the kiln, warming and cheering the hard-working potter from morning till evening, was brim full of all sorts of glowing big bowls and deep crocks and small pots, all baking inside its red belly to a fine hard glazed surface as smooth to the touch as the wax of a newly dipped taper.

And the potter was smiling because he enjoyed his work so.

One evening there were finished pots everywhere, and in the yellow light of a taper the shelves were full of a most wonderful variety of shapes and shadows and lines and circles, of pots and pots and pots. From the very lowest shelves near the floor to the topmost shelves near the ceiling, they stood row on row on long row: some out on the counter and under it, some on the floor near the back of the room, and the workshop in the rear was chock-full from front to back so that old Ymir scarcely had place to sleep – enough cups and bowls and plates to feed the whole world, it seemed.

There were slender vases, beautiful to behold, for



flowers. There were bowls for mixing bread dough, huge pots for ashes from the fires, rows of dishes and cups and saucers and plates, square ones and round ones, tall ones and tiny ones, big pots and short pots and fat pots and squat pots – the most wonderful pots in this whole wicked world.

And as old Ymir stood back wiping his hands and resting against the counter in the front of the shop, he looked at his handiwork and smiled again because the pots were good and he liked them.

“You are very pretty pots,” he said, complimenting them.

And they all thanked him and said, “We are glad you have made us so fine.”

Then he patted a fat, cheerful bowl on the belly, cheered a tall, lonely vase with a long sober face, put out the taper and walked to the front of the shop. He looked out through the window into the snowy street beyond it. He stood there a long time, and his smile dissolved in thought.

There was a broad, smooth patch of ice before the shop.

On the topmost shelf a plate rolled over carelessly in its sleep and almost fell off.

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Next morning old Ymir put up a sign, a giant red sign with white letters over the door, that read: “Open Today.” And he stood behind the counter, smiling and waiting for customers. Impatiently he tapped his fingers on the top of the counter, but he stood there all morning and no one came, no one even tried the door, and his smile soon went away.

About noon three or four women with frost-pinked noses and



cheeks, their breath hanging in small clouds before them, did peer in at the front window, looking at the shelves full of pots – and the potter, who smiled at them – but they only shrugged their shoulders and went on.

And later in the afternoon, when a small humpbacked man, hidden to his nose in a mountain of red wool, hobbled in, he closed the door behind him, stood suddenly rigid in his peculiar bent-over position, and looked slowly around the room, much disturbed and amazed.

After a blank moment or two he grabbed awkwardly at the latch, saying, “Pardon, sir. I thought this was the butcher’s shop. I must have made a mistake,” and went out, shaking his head and glancing at the sign as he went. “Potter!” he said. “Humnf! What next!” And he closed the door.

But that was all. No one else came. Nobody bought because nobody knew just how fine a potter old Ymir really was.

When he closed up for the night and walked slowly back toward the workshop, where his bed was, old Ymir saw that all the pots on the shelves were sad and some of them were crying. And he thought perhaps he might forget the whole idea.

“What good are pots?” he said, “when no one buys?”

“Yes,” said a crotchety brown crock in a corner. “What good is all your work when no one knows?”

And they all tried to sleep.

But later that night, as he lay on his bed, the warm redness of the open kiln lit up the room, and on the wall above old Ymir there grew, as big as a tree, the black shadow of the potter’s wheel standing idle on the other side of the room in front of the kiln.



*It grew and grew before his eyes until it seemed that it engulfed the whole room, and he pounded his fist on the mattress and cried aloud, "I'll do it!" And he sat bolt upright in his bed. "I'll do it!" And getting out of bed, he lit a taper and went into the shop. "It will require all my strength, all my strength."*

*He walked across the room and stood in the posture of a public speaker before the crowded gallery of shelves. "It will be my finest work, my very finest work, a showpiece of so rare a beauty and so fine a form that in its greatness and simplicity it will reach out and touch the hearts even of busy, barren men preoccupied with worry and with work and children at their play, of old men stroking beards and women baking bread and proud kings rich with scents of wine and war – of all people everywhere, this clay, this bit of crockery, for this small fleck of earth, this dab of dust, shall be – " and he paused, looking from bowl to bowl and pot to pot, "my masterpiece!"*

*Then he nodded slightly to the cheers of all the pots and bowls and dishes and, the applause still ringing in his ears, abed again, slept well.*

*But all night long the shelves in the little shop vibrated with the chatter of the cups and crocks and plates as they argued and speculated about just what the little masterpiece would be.*

*Next morning old Ymir was up before dawn. He walked to the fields and dug from the cold hard ground the finest clay he could find, then, returning, he placed it on the wheel and began to shape a bowl.*

*He worked long and hard – no one in town saw him all that day, for he never went out, he did not eat – making his new creation beautiful, useful, dainty, and strong: shaping and molding it, standing back and inspecting it, despairing and destroying and*



discarding and beginning again.

All day long and far into the night he labored, and then until dawn, and then through the next day, until finally, about sundown, it was finished, and the old potter sighed and smiled and went to bed.

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He slept fitfully that night, tossing and turning in the darkness, and awoke next morning without rest, to fret and pace in large impatient circles through the days that followed, while the new clay cured and dried, and then, when the intolerable wait was over, with the first faint light of morning on that day of days, he hurried over to the kiln and took out the bowl.

Proudly he placed it on the counter, and all over the shop all the other pots and bowls and plates and crocks and cups said, "Oh!" and "Ah!" and "My how beautiful!" because it was a masterpiece.

Then no one said anything, but old Ymir was smiling.

"Hello," said the little pot finally, for it could see the potter's pleasure.

"Hello," smiled old Ymir. "Do you know what you are?"

The pot thought it over – that is never an easy question.

"Well, I am a pot, that I know."

"Yes," said old Ymir, "and much more. You are a masterpiece, a masterpiece of such unique creation and preeminent design that, but allow one little breath of life, however crude and vulgar, merely to glimpse you from afar upon my counter, and all life with sense of sight and sound will rush from all the earth to



see you, and they will trust my skill because of you, because I have made you, and they will buy from the excellent stock of my shelves.”

“Oh, I am glad to be so wonderfully made. I shall be very glad to help you. And, to think, all the people will admire me!”

“You can do everything. You are all things for all people.”

“All things?”

“All things, I say, for in one glance all people will see in you all my best qualities and craftsmanship, my artistry and ability. They will fall in love with all I stand for when they look at you.”

“Oh, I am a beautiful and wonderful pot! And you are a great potter.”

“Thank you.”

“But what – now tell me distinctly – what shall I have to do?”

“Oh, I am a beautiful and wonderful pot! And you are a great potter.” “Thank you.” “But what – now tell me distinctly – what shall I have to do?” “Oh, I am a beautiful and wonderful pot! And you are a great potter.” “Thank you.” “But what – now tell me distinctly – what shall I have to do?”

“Many things. A few people will come in looking for a vase, delicate and fine, to hold flowers, and then you will have to hold flowers for them.”

“I shall like that very much.”

“Good. There will also be ladies who are looking for a bowl in which to mix the dough for their loaves and cakes – big, round and smooth.”



*"That shall be all right – if it is nice moist sweetsmelling dough that's put in me."*

*"Hmm. And some will want a strong sturdy pot to hold the refuse from the kitchen and the hearth."*

*"I shall not like that smell. I do not think I want very much to do that."*

*"It will be your work."*

*"Still I will not like it. I am far too fine a masterpiece to be used for such smelly work, don't you think?"*

*"It is part of your fineness to do it."*

*"I like flower-holding better."*

*"I have made you to do both. Each is a noble service."*

*"Nevertheless I shall balk at garbage."*

*"No, you shall not. I have made you and I tell you. People shall use you for their pipe ashes and old tobacco and the ashes from the hearth and garbage, and you shall not balk."*

*"I am no crock for refuse."*

*"You are all things for all people."*

*"All things indeed!"*

*"Yes! And they will sometimes even clear their throats and spit in you."*

*"And spit?"*

*"They will."*



*"I will not stand for that!"*

*"You shall! Flowers and spittle, both are alike. They are fashioned for a purpose, just like you, and you must hold them both: it is your work."*

*"I will not do such filth!"*

*"You shall! For I know what is right."*

*"But you do not know what is right for me. Flowers are right for me, not spittle."*

*"I promise you flowers, but there must be spittle too: I serve all needs; you show people how. And finally when your work is finished, I will put you high on the topmost shelf, out of reach of all the common people of the town, only to hold the most perfect of roses and lilacs and lilies all the year long."*

*"The price is too high. No flowers if there must be spittle. And if you insist on threatening me with spittle, I will not even hold flowers for you when you let me. I shall refuse to do anything."*

*"Have you no respect for your maker?"*

*"No, I'm a beautiful vase, and I am beginning to think that it may even be that I have made myself."*

*"You are a misbehaving child!"*

*"I do not care."*

*"You are rebellious!"*

*"I have feelings."*

*"And, by heaven, you shall feel them, too, I promise you, if*



*you're not careful! I tolerate no pride and no rebellion. If you do not carry out my will, I'll punish you."*

*"I don't believe you'd try."*

*"I shall! I'll smash you into bits with this hammer and strew you on the icy street before my shop, and people will tread on you and trample you into the hard cold ground, and the carts on the street and the animals will grind you slowly into dust. You shall be punished!"*

*"If you threaten me, I shall never do anything for you. I shall jump right off the counter and break myself when the very first customer walks in and asks to see your wares. And I will hurt you that way, because you will not sell any pots or bowls, because the people will not see me, and no one will ever know."*

*Well. Old Ymir would have slapped the little pot then and there, but at that moment the door opened, and the little humpbacked man from some days back came in again and wondered did old Ymir know just where was the butcher's shop because –*

*And then he saw it, suddenly saw it, saw the masterpiece sitting on the counter where old Ymir had put it. Awed and overwhelmed by the simple beauty of the little pot, he came closer to get a better look.*

*The potter smiled good morning.*

*The little pot tried to jump as it had warned the potter it would. It wanted to break itself into a million bits just to see the look on old Ymir's face. But then it remembered that if it broke itself into a million bits, it wouldn't be able to see the look on old Ymir's face, and though it looked at the floor and closed its eyes, it couldn't bring itself to do it, it no longer had the courage. And angered with its own weakness,*



*bursting with shame and frustration, it could do nothing but close tightly its eyes and ears and sit.*

*And it did.*

*It couldn't hear, and it couldn't see, but, before long, it felt flowers being placed into it and sensed the slow vibrations of the humpback's approving voice. But even the flowers had become distasteful to it, and it swore it heard the little customer clearing his throat and preparing to spit.*

*Confused, afraid, angry (afraid to jump, afraid to sit, afraid to hold the flowers, and – oh, horror! – afraid not to) in the jumble of its swirling emotions it shook so that it faltered clumsily and dropped the flowers. And they spilled all over the counter.*

*The little man was laughing with glee when the little pot opened its ears at last, and it could hear him hobble out of the shop and slam the door, still coughing and choking and spitting – and laughing! – as he walked down the cold street.*

*When the pot opened its eyes, it saw only the hot angry stare of the potter's huge eyes.*

*"Well!" the pot said, shrugging and feigning nonchalance. "How can you expect me to hold flowers for you when I must always be afraid someone will spit in me?"*

*"You are a wicked pot!" shouted old Ymir, and it seemed to the other pots that there were flames in the old potter's mouth and eyes. "You are a wicked pot! I will destroy your wickedness with the morning!"*

*And old Ymir went to bed.*

*The shelves and shelves of pots and bowls all cried themselves*



to sleep. Then the night watchman walked by once on the street.

The little pot stood alone in the night, shivering – afraid of the morning, afraid of the punishment, afraid of the hammer and the feet and the cold and the carts and the street. The pot stared longingly down at the flowers strewn about it on the counter and wished to hold them high so that old Ymir might have mercy, but all the pot could do was sob big wet sobs full of big wet tears that rolled down its side and fell like dew on the colored petals. Because old Ymir hadn't made the pot with any arms, so there wasn't any way for it to pick up the flowers.

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Then it happened. During the night somehow, suddenly perhaps – with the speed of starlight, say, or love – it happened.

New clay began in some mysterious way to leap up onto the wheel, the wheel to spin, slowly at first and then quite dizzily, and unseen hands to work, shaping and molding to its perfect form a deed of altogether unforeseen magnificence, a work of unutterable love, a wonder in the night, to be remembered ever afterward as the miracle of the clay – a simple pot, one more, a bowl, a dab of dust, a bit of earthenware, yet much, much more: one last great triumph from the master potter's wheel, one final favored showpiece for the timid trade, one final sample, one preeminent example more, useful and fine, of wizardry and skill and master craftsmanship, exactly like the first in every way, a perfect double for the little pot that had talked back, all moist and new now on the spinning potter's wheel, a masterpiece, a work of wonder and of genius, newborn in the night.

And when the coals deep in the kiln began to glow, as though it were the breath of old Ymir himself that breathed on them – and



not that merely of some old and tattered bellows puffing – suddenly again, in some unnatural way, in one split second, or quite likely even less, the new pot seemed both in and out of its hot belly and already cool, baked hard and beautiful and smooth there in the cold, dark night. And as it stood atop the bench, it looked, seemed to the staring dark to be, like him, the master potter, old Ymir himself, his work, his soul, his being, yet – a pot.

Quickly the new little pot rolled to the front of the shop, where the little pot that had talked back still stood, frightened and shivering, among the flowers it had refused to hold and could not pick up.

“Hello,” said the miraculous new creation, hidden in shadow at the edge of the counter.

“Go away,” said the little pot that had talked back. “I have troubles enough without you standing there staring at me.”

“I’m not staring at you. I’ve come to rescue you.”

“That’s what you say. No one will rescue me. You’ve come to stare and laugh at me.”

“I haven’t. I’ve come to save you.”

“Well, what are you waiting for then? ”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Pick up these silly flowers.”

“Pick up the flowers?”

“And put them in my mouth so I can hold them. Is that so much to ask?”



*"No. Of course not."*

*"Well, then do it. Don't just stand there staring, stupid, do it!"*

*But the new pot seemed unable to move.*

*"I don't think I can," it said at last.*

*"I knew you wouldn't."*

*"I would if I could, but I don't think I can."*

*"You won't."*

*"I can't."*

*"Why not?"*

*The new pot hung its head and edged into the moonlight. "I'm like you," it said softly. "I'm just like you. I have no arms."*

*"Some rescuer you are – a silly little pot with no arms just like me!"*

*"There must be something I can do."*

*"Yes, you can go away. That's what you can do."*

*"I want to rescue you."*

*"You can't rescue me."*

*"Please let me try."*

*"You can't, don't you see? You can't rescue anyone – you have no arms. Rescuers must be special. They must have arms and legs. They must be able to work wonders. You're no rescuer, you're common clay."*



*"But I can stand beside you in the darkness, all the same."*

*"Just go away."*

*"It's comforting sometimes to have a friend nearby in the darkness."*

*"I said go away."*

*"I'll stand beside you in the darkness until morning comes."*

*"What good will that do? That won't pick these silly flowers up. When morning comes, that horrid potter's hammer will come crashing down on top of me and smash me into bits. What good will standing there beside me do then?"*

*"It will give you courage."*

*"I don't need courage, I need flowers in my mouth!"*

*"I love you," said the newborn masterpiece.*

*"I don't love you," said the little pot that had talked back. "I don't love anyone. I hate you all. And I want to be alone, do you hear? I want to be alone!"*

*But the new pot did not move or answer, so the little pot that had talked back threw itself with all its might against the miraculous new creation. They collided with a fearful crack, then tumbled in a tangle toward the counter's edge and disappeared there in the darkness.*

*The emptiness beyond rang with a frightened cry.*

*Perhaps they shattered on the floor below a moment afterward. The other bowls and dishes on the shelves all held their breath and listened for the crash.*



No sound was heard though. Nothing occurred. Not a clock tick, not a word disturbed the silence of the night. Outside, clouds covered the stars. Wind blew. Snow fell. The world turned white.

Then the clouds drew apart, and the moon broke through.

And there in the moonlight, surrounded by flowers, in the very spot where the little pot that had talked back had been, stood the miraculous new creation, waiting for old Ymir and the morning.

In another patch of moonlight, near a window, lay the hammer.

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Before long, the first cold streaks of dawn appeared, and, with them, the potter, anxious to have done with his sorrowful business as quickly as possible, his wrath at the wickedness of clay welling up inside him and spreading like a poison through his arms and fingers.

He seized his hammer with the fury of fire, and seeing a pot in the midst of the fallen flowers where the little pot that had talked back had been, brought it down like a thunderclap upon the newborn masterpiece, and shattered it, into a million tiny bits of colored pot that flew about through the air with a cry of pain and landed in a shower of clay on the floor at its feet.

The other bowls and dishes on the shelves could only stare and shiver and cowered in corners where they could, and an oppressive silence settled upon the room. There was no noise but the heavy breathing of old Ymir as he stood, head bowed, behind his counter, his hammer in his hand, its iron head still resting where it had thundered down.



*And for a moment in the half light, in the first dark dawning of the day, the hand that held the hammer seemed not flesh at all, but clay, the hand less of a potter than of frightened, wayward clay.*

*The red sun rose above the mountains, shone for a moment, then disappeared among the clouds. Old Ymir fetched a frayed broom from a corner and with heavy, rasping strokes swept the broken bits of pot out through the door.*

*They landed with a clatter on the icy street before it.*

*A heavy cart soon rumbled by, its wheels humping and bumping over the snow-clad cobblestones with a crunching, grinding noise.*

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*It wasn't until later in the day, when the potter was cleaning out the dark shelves under his counter and whisking away the cobwebs crisscrossing them, that he discovered, hidden away among the dust and crying quietly to itself, the little pot that had talked back, cowering and afraid, washing the shelf with its tears. In its mouth it was holding tightly a single flower that had somehow got there since the morning – a beautiful pure white rose.*

*"Will you punish me too now?" asked the pot of old Ymir. "I have been very horrible."*

*"No," said the potter. "I have destroyed your wickedness."*

*And the little pot just stared. It didn't quite know what to make of it all.*

*"Don't be afraid," said old Ymir. "My anger has gone."*

*And he smiled.*



*Then the little pot smiled, too. It seemed as if the potter might have known all along, that all this might have been in his plan right from the beginning. "All right," it said. And that night the people who walked past old Ymir's shop – and into it: business was heavy – noticed that an unusual thing had happened: the ground before the shop was glowing with a strange and marvelous light right where he'd thrown down the broken pieces of pot. In fact, upon closer inspection, they discovered that the light was coming from all the little bits of clay themselves that lay upon it. Day and night the strange light continued, day after day, night after night, always the same, and then suddenly, one night, in a twinkling, it was gone, and no one ever saw anything exactly like it again.*

*But people couldn't help wondering what had happened.*

*They are wondering to this very day.*

*END*

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## **Book review: "Cross Examinations: Readings on the Meaning of the Cross Today"**

Colleagues,

[I thought I'd get around to ruminating on last week's wingding Crossings conference for this week's ThTh post. But not yet. Just this a.m. we took the last of our five



international guests to the airport—all of them having crashed with us—so now first we can breathe. Tomorrow, perhaps, think. Next Thursday, maybe . . . . However while we regenerate at our place, the conference committee—cyber-savvy all of them—is blogging up a storm of follow-up stuff. If they don't tell you directly before next Thursday about that, I'll try to clue you in.]Today's posting is a book review, the work of William L. Yancey, pastor at Bethel Lutheran Church in University City (suburban St. Louis), Missouri. Our family has been part of the Bethel congregation for 36 years. That means that Bill is our pastor. He's a Seminex grad and also did his doctorate in systematic theology at Seminex. He's a wordsmith—both here and in his preaching—and also a thoughtful theologian in both arenas. Read on and see for yourself.

Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder

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***Cross Examinations: Readings on the Meaning of the Cross Today.***

***Marit A. Trelstad (Editor).***

***Minneapolis, Fortress Press.***

***Paperback. 336 pages.***

***Online price \$20.00***

*In Cross Examinations, a collection of articles that explores the meaning of the cross in today's context, Editor Marit Trelstad, Assistant Professor of Religion at the Pacific Lutheran University, describes a pendulum swinging away from an emphasis on atonement for personal sins toward an understanding of "the cross, atonement, and salvation" from a perspective "of*



live, pressing social issues.” The writers make no claim that Christ atones only for the massive social structures of sin, such as racism and sexism, but that socially organized systems of death must not be ignored in a fuller understanding of God’s action in Jesus. An exclusive focus on individual sin and salvation permits the social manifestations of evil to work their destruction unchallenged. Without critique, the perpetuation of unjust social systems is encouraged, and the truth of the cross is twisted to support historical systems of oppression.

Writers in this volume critique traditional atonement theories: “ransom” to the devil; Anselm’s “satisfaction” for the injured honor of God; Abelard’s “moral” example of love; the reformer’s “substitution” of Jesus for us for sin; Aulén’s Christus Victor (warrior) over sin and death. Because these atonement theories necessarily mirror their historical context, they often prove inadequate for contemporary times. Worse, structures of systemic oppression have co-opted these older theories, coercing victims to accept passively self-denigration and victimization. From this perspective “the cross” can be used to support systems that perpetuate suffering.

Womanist theologians especially note the tendency of traditional atonement theories to sacralize victimage and suffering. They note that women of color have historically experienced the structural overlay of racism upon gender oppression. Specifically, black women have been made to bear sexual, economic, and racial oppression and endure death itself on behalf of the dominant culture. The technical term used to name the black woman’s lived reality of passive suffering is “surrogacy.” Womanist writers reject any use of the cross to justify surrogacy and oppression at the hands of abusive individuals or structures. An oft-cited example is the idea that an abused woman should “bear her cross,” that is, stay in



*an abusive situation for the sake of maintaining “the relationship.”*

*Current attention to forms of oppression such as racism and sexism emphasize theoretical understandings, such as liberation, that promote release from victimage and make self-acceptance possible.*

*Within the theme of liberation, the pendulum swings towards human agency and resistance to evil. James Poling, for example, “raises to ontological status human resistance to evil,” suggesting that resistance to death is in human beings’ true nature, reflecting God’s will embodied in Jesus to resist death and bring life through the experience of repaired relationships. The cross, then, represents resistance to evil and Jesus’ solidarity with victims.*

*Other authors in this volume question the idea that Jesus’ death is an acceptable sacrifice for a debt owed to God. Womanist theologian Delores S. Williams states that “[h]umankind is...redeemed through Jesus’ life and not through Jesus’ death.” Rosemary Carbine clarifies in her article “Contextualizing the Cross for the Sake of Subjectivity” why atonement theories should move away from placing singular emphasis upon Jesus’ death: Disconnecting Jesus’ death from its historical and theological context, namely from the whole of his life and ministry, risks idealizing a victim identity and losing active agency in confronting sin in its historical context. Furthermore, in an atonement system in which a death seems to be demanded, God becomes an “avenger,” (see J. Denny Weaver), even an “abuser.”*

*The problem is solved, according to writers like Carbine, by paying attention to Jesus’ whole ministry. By focusing upon Jesus’ resistance to contextual forms of death and oppression*



in his life and ministry, that is, by underscoring Jesus' absolute intention to bring life to all whom he encountered as a complete articulation of God's will for him, the cross is reclaimed as a life-giving symbol and reality. Carbine sees the truth of the cross as the in-breaking of the future realm of God. Eschatology calls for a new world, one in which Jesus' followers risk suffering, rather than passively endure oppression.

A movement toward a wholistic understanding of Jesus' ministry reflects another theological trend or recovery, namely, the emphasis upon the "relational" nature of salvation. In fact, in this edition, the concept of relationship emerges as the fundamental understanding of atonement. Mary J. Streufert writes that, "[r]elationship, as the heart of life, indeed, as the heart of the gospel itself, saves." James N. Poling sees the encounter with the living Christ who enters humankind's historical story as part of a "relational web" (emphasis mine) that transforms the individual. Trelstad imagines a relational model as a "parental model of love or grace," God's free gift of life-giving relationship with humankind. Salvation is the "human-divine relation" reconciled.

German theologian Jürgen Moltmann also argues for a relational theology and understanding of atonement. He begins, however, from an analysis of "suffering" as the fundamental relational moment. In the midst of suffering, and most clearly upon the cross, Jesus related completely to humankind in the very depths of suffering places where no one else can find us. Christ relates most deeply to us and for us in the passion. Moltmann's emphasis upon the profoundly relational quality of Christ's suffering distinguishes him from other European theologians. This distinction is fascinatingly highlighted in a posthumous exchange with Catholic theologian Karl Rahner, who with his disciple Johann Baptist Metz argues against such a passionate



God and for a Deus impassibilis. For Moltmann, such a characterization suggests a deity disconnected from humanity and incapable of offering real comfort.

A relational concept of atonement also plays into responses to Martin Luther's theology. Mary J. Streufert claims that Luther's theology of the cross relies upon a sacrificial paradigm (the sacrifice of a hero) in which Luther's "happy exchange" seems more like a legal transaction than an impacting, transforming relationship. While acknowledging the divide between contemporary feminist theologians and Luther, Deanna A. Thompson argues compellingly that Luther's theology is deeply relational. She offers an insightful explanation of what it means for Jesus to become sin for humankind: Jesus meets humans in the depths of their need. The cross becomes the image and reality of God in Jesus. Following Gerhard Forde, Thompson understands Luther's famous pro me assertion concerning Jesus' actions to mean standing "on our behalf" not "instead of us." By choosing to be in relation with us, Jesus bears all for us. Thompson calls this a model of deep friendship as opposed to a forensic model of payment for a debt owed.

Mary M. Solberg claims that "Luther understood theology to be relational at its heart," moving him to be concerned with how human beings live in relationship with others. One understands who God is by Jesus' relational connection to the poor and lost. Failure and culpability are confronted in this relational connection to Jesus. All are called to a "responsive accountability" to stand in solidarity with the "excluded." In the context of a relationship with Jesus and neighbor, humankind recognizes failed relationships with God and others: We stand coram deo and coram mundo, individually and corporately convicted, having opposed God's will and having oppressed the one whom God sent. Having come to give life,



Jesus experiences death all around him. His experience underscores that his life was not simply a “lead-up” to the cross event, but rather that all the events of his life were marked by the cross. There was never a moment when Jesus failed to resist sin, death, and the devil in all their individual and corporate forms.

In *Cross Examinations*, the Gospel of John implicitly emerges as the fundamental scriptural resource for critique of atonement theories based on an understanding of death as a payment to a vindictive God. The reviewer offers two observations. First, the Gospel of John emphasizes Jesus’ announcement that he has come to give life, as opposed to the synoptic Gospels’ emphasis on the prediction of Jesus’ death. Second, John’s gospel is more conversational and relational. Unlike the synoptics in which the realm of God is often read as a place, in John’s gospel the realm of new life is a conversation in which the dialogue partners with Jesus radically “believe into” him and his new reality.

In a relational understanding of atonement, and in critique of the notion that Jesus was sent to die, traditional language of “sacrifice” also falls under suspicion: either God is an avenger, or powerless people are encouraged “to sacrifice” their agency and personhood to abusers. In an insightful article, Mark S. Heim, relying on the recent work of the literary critic René Girard, argues that Jesus was indeed a sacrifice in the sense that since the beginning of history scapegoats have been killed to placate humankind’s violent nature and maintain social order. But Jesus’ death was the sacrifice to end all sacrifice, to renounce all violence, to restore all victims. Heim claims that the “kind” of death Jesus died, that is death on the cross, makes a difference. Any other death is simply the sound of inevitability. Jesus’ death is our death as we are the ones who sacrifice and who are sacrificed.



*Only a death on a cross can be effective, not because God demands extreme suffering, but because this death is uniquely ours both in cause and victimage. Jesus' death on the cross puts an end to it all. Heim's analysis of sacrifice language echoes Moltmann's assertion that the cross of Christ ended sacrificial religion "once for all."*

*The articles in Cross Examinations attend to another pressing social concern, an ecological understanding of God's work. Cynthia Moe-Lobeda asks, "What suffers more these days than our own planet?" In "A Theology of the Cross for the 'Uncreators'" she calls us to think of the earth itself as being crucified, and for humanity to understand sin as actions that undo God's creation. Attention to the creation concomitantly attends to the oppressed and lost because they are the human casualties of economic policies that wreak havoc on the environment. (On this topic, see also the article by Jay McDaniel.)*

*This collection of articles describes the cross not as an isolated reality, but rather as reflective of the life Jesus lived and came to bring. In bringing good news and the realm of God to all people, especially the lost, Jesus lived a cruciform existence, rejecting all offers of power that depended upon the oppression of others. He accepted the consequences of standing with those who endured the devastation of being devalued and deemed unworthy of God's acceptance and love. Jesus stands in divine relationship with all in need and calls the powerful to repent of actions contrary to God's will to care for all of humanity and creation. Inasmuch as the cross marks Jesus' entire life, it is the will of God. God's will for us is that Jesus find us where we suffer, never permitting suffering to deflect him from God's will to bring life.*

*Finally, these articles describe the cross as a paradoxical image, a simultaneity of contraries. Jesus willingly goes to*



the cross to find the lost, driven there by the forces of death, in which all participate. The very place to which he has been driven becomes the place from which he restores. The cross simultaneously serves as an image of individual and systemic sin. It symbolizes the violence by which political systems maintain order and also stands as a symbol of particular victims and individual participation in systems of violence. Because human beings have driven Jesus to the cross, he becomes sin for us, "pro nobis," not to assuage God, but to change us. We cannot be transformed until we stand before the cross, which tells us the truth of ourselves: we have opposed God and driven Jesus in a deadly way to the cross. From the cross we are embraced in the new truth that transforms our existence. We are transformed by Jesus standing with us and forgiving us. Because the articles are more victim- than sin-oriented, the authors only thinly reference forgiveness—a notable omission because forgiveness is a deeply relational and transformative reality in either understanding.

This volume also has implications for the concept of faith. (See particularly Alice Vargas, "Reading Ourselves Into the Cross Story.") The wholistic approach corrects an exclusive emphasis on Jesus' death that distances human life from Jesus' life, rendering faith an abstract event hardly involving the believer. Looking at the entirety of Jesus' life and ministry reveals not only the truth of Christ but also the truth of ourselves. Consequently, Paul's call to die daily to sin and rise to new life makes experiential sense, and faith becomes a transformative force in the world. Jesus is really present in daily life, not a supernatural ideal.

Salvation, then, is relational, not substitutionary. Jesus' complete ministry—his life, death, resurrection—is one of relating to humankind in the most extreme circumstances. Faith, a deep trust in the one who relates completely to us and brings



*life, is no passive event, but an event of agency in which we confess the truth of ourselves and cling to the one who finds us and forgives our worst and most deadly moments. Then, called to agency by the Holy Spirit, we are empowered to resist death wherever we encounter it.*

*William L. Yancey, pastor  
Bethel Lutheran Church  
St. Louis, Missouri*

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## **Sermon from Crossings Conference (2007) “The Net Made Flesh”**

Colleagues,

This Thursday (Feb. 1) came up pretty fast. The very day after last week's posting the international guests started arriving for the 3-day Crossings Conference: “Honest-to-God Gospel For Today's Church and World.” By Sunday evening we had five in our home, from Germany, Australia, Ethiopia, Singapore. Early Monday morning we then drove to the conference site across the Mississippi River in Illinois. We're finally back home and it's Thursday again. Attendance was 130—clergy/ laity ratio 2/1. It was stellar. So much so, that I can't (yet) do much show-and-tell about it. So I send on to you an artifact from those mountaintop days of Gospel-Grounding and Church-and-World-Crossing. It's Fred Niedner's sermon from our festival worship on Tuesday evening. Fred is Chair, Department of Theology, Valparaiso University. Next



Thursday I may be able to say more. Peace and Joy!  
Ed Schroeder

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***The Net Made Flesh***  
***Epiphany 5, Series C***  
***Honest to God Gospel Conference Eucharist, 30 Jan***  
***'07***

***Luke 5:1-11***

*Once while Jesus was standing beside the lake of Gennesaret, and the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God, he saw two boats there at the shore of the lake; the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets. He got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little way from the shore. Then he sat down and taught the crowds from the boat. When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, "Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch." Simon answered, "Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets." When they had done this, they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break. So they signaled their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both boats, so that they began to sink. But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!"*

*9 For he and all who were with him were amazed at the catch of fish that they had taken; and so also were James and John, sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon. Then Jesus said to Simon, "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching*



people.” When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him.

### **1 Corinthians 15:1-11**

Now I would remind you, brothers and sisters, of the good news that I proclaimed to you, which you in turn received, in which also you stand, 2 through which also you are being saved, if you hold firmly to the message that I proclaimed to you— unless you have come to believe in vain. 3 For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, 4 and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, 5 and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. 6 Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. 7 Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. 8 Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. 9 For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. 10 But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me has not been in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them— though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me. 11 Whether then it was I or they, so we proclaim and so you have come to believe.

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*The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke. And I said: "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!" Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: "Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out." Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" And I said, "Here am I; send me!"*

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sins and iniquities by which I have ever offended thee and justly deserved thy eternal punishment . . . and I am by nature sinful and unclean. . .” I assumed the adults in my church only said that because it was good form, and even more so that we children were sure to say it also. We were the sinners. They were adults, after all, and what sins did adults ever commit? What trouble did they ever get into? They were too old for the stuff that got me scolded, spanked, sent to my room, and later grounded. Only children ever sinned and got punished for it.

It took a while to learn the deep truth of Isaiah’s protest and Peter’s demurral, but learn it I have. I will tell you one of the moments when part of it dawned on me. Like 200 or so others among my generation of future pastors of the Lutheran church who went through the legendary, famous, or infamous LC-MS “system,” which included a couple years of college in Ft. Wayne, I spent several summers driving trucks for North American Van Lines. At world headquarters in Ft. Wayne, North American trained us for a week, mostly in completing the paperwork, and then turned us loose on the world in semis. To my knowledge we all survived. The same is not true of all our trucks, or the customers’ furniture.

Temptations abounded in that world. I could write a book, or a seminarian’s rendition of “I’ve Been Everywhere.” But I resisted-the temptations I recognized, that is-mostly from fear. One day I got my truck’s oil changed in Omaha, Nebraska, on my way from Calais, Maine, to Oxnard, California. In case you’re interested, it takes nearly 50 quarts of oil to fill the crankcase of a Cummins 250 diesel engine. Later, as I pulled into the weigh-station about 40 miles west of Omaha on I-80, my oil pressure warning buzzer went off. What in the world? I shut the engine off and stepped out of the truck.

Immediately I could see and smell the trouble. The entire front



end of my trailer was covered with fresh, golden motor oil—about 50 quarts worth, the way it looked. The weigh-station personnel let me use a phone to summon a truck mechanic from a nearby town, and while that quiet, middle-aged fellow put 50 more quarts of oil into the engine, I fumed about the idiot mechanic back in Omaha who had pinched a gasket on one of the oil filters, thereby causing all this inconvenience and trouble. As my rant wound down, the mechanic who'd listened as he worked finally said calmly, "Well, once there was a perfect man who walked the earth. But that was a long time ago, and he's gone." He turned from the engine to look at me, and said, "Now there's only us."

It wasn't smoking, blistering seraphim like Isaiah encountered, or a lakeshore lesson from an amateur who taught the pros how to fish, but it was an epiphany of sorts. I was speechless. I'd gotten nailed. I'd spent a year as a seminarian by the time of that roadside conversation, and this other man was using the lines I should have known. I was the theologian in training. Since that day, I have always known that in every crowd, however small, there is likely someone a whole lot saner, wiser, and with a better grip on theology than me. And, I was a sinful man. My most shameful act had been exposed. I always knew better than anyone else, or thought I did. I was quick to blame whenever something went wrong, and I offered little margin for error.

I headed for California that afternoon a humbled man, and I would love to tell you that I was also a changed man, a permanently chastened man. But alas, I still think, talk, and often act as though I know better than anyone else—not just students, but presidents, bishops, colleagues, and most consistently my family members. This has cost me dearly, pretty much all my life. Oh, how I love to be right. And it's only the beginning of my sins, a mere smudge on the dipstick, so to



*speaking. The rest would be another big, sorry book. God, or Christ the Amateur Fisherman, is nuts to recruit me, even for the freshman team, much less the varsity mission. "Get away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man," I, too, cry out. And even when that's most sincere, not merely mid-western politeness, think of how audacious and idolatrous it is to talk like that. Who am I to say whom God can and can't use? I know better than God who should be a prophet, a priest, a net-hauler? I can't even do this demurral thing righteously. I am a poor, sinful being. And yet, here I am. Here we all are. How did you get here?*

*As I confessed to some of you in sessions earlier today, I used to think I was here, or in the best place possible, because I was right about doctrine, and others were off in lesser places where they believed in faulty doctrines. I knew it wasn't all on my own. I was right in the way that Paul was right when he duked it out with the Galatians, because we both had God and Jesus on our side. But it wasn't a net of rightness that hauled me in here to be part of this collection of God's saints. The net that caught me was the only one Christ has ever used in his fishing expedition, "catching people." How many disciples did Jesus win by his words, his parables, or even his miracles? A tiny handful, really, and they all ran away at the end of the story. So what is it that has brought us to be here today, a part of the vast throng that's been caught in the net that God hauls through this world?*

*It's his crucifixion-the sacrifice of his life to death. That's what has us here. That's what we're baptized into as God's people. I'm not found or saved or whole because I believe Jesus was right about the lilies of the field being adorned more beautifully than Solomon in his splendor, or about God having the hairs of our head numbered, or even that he was right about a lot more important things. I'm not even saved because I have*



*Nicea and Chalcedon figured out and kept straight.*

*I'm baptized into Christ's death. Out there on the Interstate that day, when I got nailed, in that moment I landed in the company of the nailed, and the Nailed One, the Christ. That's how I came into Christ's company. I had e-mail recently from a young student doing research for a religion paper at some other college-an occupational hazard these days, thanks to "the web." He wanted to know what verses in Paul's letters had "brought me to Christ." I had to write back saying that I cherished many of Paul's words, and I find that some have given me direction over the years. But a 23-year-old woman and her 25-year-old husband brought me to Christ. They'd been married barely a year when they had me, and loved me more than anything in the world. I'm convinced now that either one of them would have given life itself for me if necessary. They brought me to the safest place they knew-the arms of this community, through baptism in a tiny Wyoming church with a font like that one here in the rear of this sanctuary.*

*I'm not sure any more how wise people are at 23 and 25. Those folks seem like children to me now. But they somehow sensed that sooner or later I'd get nailed, crucified, or at least drowned in my own stuff. So they took me to get crucified with Christ, in the waters of baptism, so that when my time came, at least I wouldn't have to die alone. I didn't quite understand it at the time, but as I got nailed that day, crucified with Christ, I also got cruciformed, cross-shaped, and strung together with a whole lot of other nailed, cross-shaped, cruciformed lives, a bunch like those in the funny scene at the end of Luke's gospel-crucified folks talking to each other about their future plans. "Hey Jesus, you with the 'king' sign over your head! Remember me, like Joseph remembered the baker-or was it the butler?-when he got out of prison and rose to power!" Jesus says, "Sure, friend. You and me." How odd it*



*looked to the bystanders and soldiers. Crucified folks making plans!?!*

*But that's us-strung together now as the net. Did you ever notice that a net is just a bunch of crosses strung tightly together? That's what we see on Golgatha in Luke 23-the beginning of the net. It's this net that God hauls through the world, and especially through the same part of the sea as on that day back in Galilee. Mostly God's catch comes from the depths, so that's where God hauls us, with us holding tightly to one another. "Out of the depths" calls every psalmist, sooner or later, the practiced ones and the unpracticed. So that's where God's net must go. God drags us through the deep, over and over.*

*Dear friends, we don't mend, tend, or haul the net; rather, by God's grace we become the net. God does the mending, the daily washing, and the morning by morning encouragement and direction of would-be catchers who have fished all night and come home empty. Oh, we're part of all that mending. It happens here, in this community, when we work at forgiveness of sins, confession and absolution, practicing the truth of our baptismal covenant, taking into ourselves the body and blood of Christ-the meal that makes us his own nail-marked body and nourishes us for his tireless work in this world. Mostly, though, we are the net. Christ's net.*

*Yes, once there walked among us a perfect man who was right about everything. But he gave that up. And now, marked with the sign of his cross, there's just us. And we keep on hauling, and being hauled, over and over, through the deep.*

*Frederick Niedner*

*Crossings Conference, Belleville, IL 30 Jan '07*



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# The Net Made Flesh

Epiphany 5, Series C

Honest to God Gospel Conference Eucharist, 30 Jan '07

## **Luke 5:1-11**

Once while Jesus was standing beside the lake of Gennesaret, and the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God, he saw two boats there at the shore of the lake; the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets. He got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little way from the shore. Then he sat down and taught the crowds from the boat. When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, "Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch." Simon answered, "Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets." When they had done this, they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break. So they signaled their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both boats, so that they began to sink. But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!" 9 For he and all who were with him were amazed at the catch of fish that they had taken; and so also were James and John, sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon. Then Jesus said to Simon, "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people." When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him.

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It's his crucifixion—the sacrifice of his life as his way of loving us to death. That's what has us here. That's what we're baptized into as God's people. I'm not found or saved or whole because I believe Jesus was right about the lilies of the field being adorned more beautifully than Solomon in his splendor, or about God having the hairs of our head numbered, or even that he was right about a lot more important things. I'm not even saved because I have Nicea and Chalcedon figured out and kept straight.



I'm baptized into Christ's death. Out there on the Interstate that day, when I got nailed, in that moment I landed in the company of the nailed, and the Nailed One, the Christ. That's how I came into Christ's company.

I had e-mail recently from a young student doing research for a religion paper at some other college— an occupational hazard these days, thanks to “the web.” He wanted to know what verses in Paul's letters had “brought me to Christ.” I had to write back saying that I cherished many of Paul's words, and I find that some have given me direction over the years. But a 23-year-old woman and her 25-year-old husband brought me to Christ. They'd been married barely a year when they had me, and loved me more than anything in the world. I'm convinced now that either one of them would have given life itself for me if necessary. They brought me to the safest place they knew—the arms of this community, through baptism in a tiny Wyoming church with a font like that one here in the rear of this sanctuary.

I'm not sure any more how wise people are at 23 and 25. Those folks seem like children to me now. But the somehow sense that sooner or later I'd get nailed, crucified, or at least drowned in my own stuff. So they took me to get crucified with Christ, in the waters of baptism, so that when my time came, at least I wouldn't have to die alone.

I didn't quite understand it at the time, but as I got nailed that day, crucified with Christ, I also got cruciformed, cross-shaped, and strung together with a whole lot of other nailed, cross-shaped, cruciformed lives, a bunch like those in the funny scene at the end of Luke's gospel—crucified folks talking to each other about their future plans. “Hey Jesus, you with the “king” sign over your head! Remember me, like Joseph remembered the baker—or was it the butler?—when he got out of prison and rose to power!” Jesus says, “Sure, friend. You and me.” How odd



it looked to the bystanders and soldiers. Crucified folks making plans!?!

But that's us—strung together now as the net. Did you ever notice that a net is just a bunch of crosses strung tightly together? That's what we see on Golgatha in Luke 23—the beginning of the net. It's this net that God hauls through the world, and especially through the same part of the sea as on that day back in Galilee. Mostly God's catch comes from the depths, so that's where God hauls us, with us holding tightly to one another. "Out of the depths" calls every psalmist, sooner or later, the practiced ones and the unpracticed. So that's where God's net must go. God drags us through the deep, over and over.

Dear friends, we don't mend, tend, or haul the net; rather, by God's grace we become the net. God does the mending, the daily washing, and the morning by morning encouragement and direction of would-be catchers who have fished all night and come home empty. Oh, we're part of all that mending. It happens here, in this community, when we work at forgiveness of sins, confession and absolution, practicing the truth of our baptismal covenant, taking into ourselves the body and blood of Christ—the meal that makes us his own nail-marked body and nourishes us for his tireless work in this world. Mostly, though, we *are* the net. Christ's net.

Yes, once there walked among us a perfect man who was right about everything. But he gave that up. And now, marked with the sign of his cross, there's just us. And we keep on hauling, and being hauled, over and over, through the deep.

Frederick Niedner

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