

“Honest-to-God Gospel as Source of the Church’s Life and Mission”

Dr. Kathryn Kleinhans
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“Honest-to-God Gospel as Source of the Church’s Life and Mission”

or

“From Dualistic Misunderstanding to Dialectical Pragmatism: Brief Notes Toward a Two Kingdoms Ecclesiology”

We begin with Article VII of the Augsburg Confession:1

VII. [THE CHURCH]

1 It is also taught among us that one holy Christian church will be and remain forever. This is the assembly of all believers among whom the Gospel is preached in its purity and the holy sacraments are administered according to the Gospel. 2 For it is sufficient for the true unity of the Christian church that the Gospel be preached in conformity with a pure understanding of it and that the sacraments be administered in accordance with the divine Word. 3 It is not necessary for the true unity of the Christian church that ceremonies, instituted by [humans], should be observed uniformly in all places. 4 It

is as Paul says in Eph. 4:4, 5, “There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call, one Lord, one faith, one baptism.”

Thus far the text.

If we take seriously the title of this presentation, “Honest-to-God Gospel as Source of the Church’s Life and Mission,” then the most important thing I can say in light of Article VII is to call your attention to worship this evening, where, assembled in hearing the Word and receiving the sacrament, we will not talk about church but will be church, will be gospeled into life and mission.

The Augsburg Confession does not stop with article VII, however, nor will I. It seems to me that our task this morning (and our ongoing task as church) lies in the tension between AC VII on the church and Article XV on church usages.

Here, then, is Article XV of the Augsburg Confession:

XV. CHURCH USAGES

1 With regard to church usages that have been established by [humans], it is taught among us that those usages are to be observed which may be observed without sin and which contribute to peace and good order in the church 2 Yet we accompany these observances with instruction so that consciences may not be burdened by the notion that such things are necessary for salvation.

But what exactly does this mean for us in 2007?

Ecclesiology has been a contested issue in the ELCA from its very beginnings and this from those who would point (or pull?) the church in different directions. My interest in – and sense

of urgency about – this topic has been informed by several ongoing conversations in the church, including debates about the role of bishops (prompted by the Lutheran – Episcopal full communion proposals) and about the status of gays and lesbians in the church and in the church’s ministry.

In January 2005, I was asked to write a brief response to the recommendations of the ELCA’s sexuality task force for the *Journal of Lutheran Ethics*. I quote from those brief remarks in full, because that invitation served as the germ for these reflections on ecclesiology.

[1] When I have spoken publicly on these issues in recent years, I have said that if decisions concerning blessing same-sex unions and rostering persons in such unions split the church (in either direction), it will not be because of the issues themselves but because we have failed to understand and to live out what it means to be the church of Jesus Christ. For generations Lutherans associated “church” too closely with ethnic identity. In our current politicized climate, the danger is that we define “church” as the community of the like-minded.

[2] In that spirit, I commend the task force for the first and foundational recommendation that we seek to maintain the unity of the ELCA by “liv[ing] together faithfully in the midst of our disagreements.” I am pleased by the clear statement of the task force report that people taking diverse positions on the issues before us all hold to the authority of the scriptures as the inspired Word of God, although they interpret and apply those scriptures differently in some areas. As a survivor of the civil war in the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod in the 1970s, I see no value in attempting to justify one’s own position by impugning the faithfulness of others.

[3] Some will doubtless see the Task Force recommendations to

exercise pastoral discretion as a cop-out. I am not at all convinced, however, that the Task Force has taken a “safe” position. Rather than making a recommendation that would alienate one “side” of the church, the Task Force has attempted to carve out a middle way that will surely bring criticism from both ends of the spectrum. I hear the two dissenting positions – one to change the rules, one to enforce the rules more firmly and consistently – as expressions of the desire to “settle this once and for all,” and that the Task Force refuses to do. If the recommendations are received by this church primarily as an attempt at political compromise, then we have created a “lose-lose” situation in which everyone is left unsatisfied. If we are to continue to be church together, the recommendations of the task force must be embraced actively as an invitation to ongoing discernment as members of one body.

[4] Nonetheless I find the task force’s understanding of church and of law to be somewhat limited. I believe our deliberations would be strengthened by a two kingdoms lens, specifically by the recognition that the church exists not only as the body of Christ constituted by the proclamation of the Gospel and administration of the sacraments but also as an institution in a world of institutions. The discussion of law in the task force recommendations and in the church at large has tended to focus on the law’s theological and (much-debated) pedagogical uses. I am struck by the lack of attention to the civil use of the law, for the question of rostering persons for public ministry is (contrary to appearances, perhaps) a civil matter of church polity rather than a theological matter of church identity. That there is a ministry of Word and sacrament is God’s gift and command; how we choose to order that ministry and who we call to it are subject to change with time and circumstance. The task force’s first recommendation is a theological call to unity, to journey

together faithfully as we continue to discern together the mind of Christ. Its second and third recommendations are policy recommendations. Perhaps naming these latter two recommendations explicitly as policy (which is always provisional) rather than as doctrine will help us move forward.²

How might a two kingdoms approach speak to our situation? When I introduce two kingdoms thinking in my Lutheran Heritage course, I emphasize that two kingdoms is not at all the same thing as the modern western separation of church and state, since the latter intends to limit God to the church side of the so-called wall of separation while the former insists stridently that both kingdoms belong to God. Ironically, I believe that the church makes a similar error when it attempts to locate itself, as church, only within the realm of spiritual authority (sometimes called “the kingdom of the right”). Certainly the church is the assembly of believers constituted by the proclamation of the Gospel and the administration of the sacraments (AC VII). But it is also true that “we have this treasure in earthen vessels” (2 Cor. 4:7), i.e., actual, albeit penultimate, structures. A two kingdoms perspective suggests an ecclesiology that acknowledges church *both* as the assembly constituted through Word and sacrament *and* as an institution among institutions within God’s created and ordered world. When we disparage the church as institution, we are left with an ecclesiology that is basically docetic, in which the church appears to be human, but it isn’t really.

From Either/Or to Both/And

In his treatise “On Temporal Authority,” written in 1523, Luther divides humanity into two categories that seem to be mutually exclusive: “true believers” in Christ belong to the kingdom of God while “all who are not Christians belong to the *kingdom* of the world” (LW 45:88, 90).³

For this reason [Luther states] God has ordained two *governments*: the spiritual, by which the Holy Spirit produces Christians and righteous people under Christ; and the temporal, which restrains the un-Christian and wicked so that—no thanks to them—they are obliged to keep still and to maintain an outward peace (LW 45:91).

Christians, among themselves and by and for themselves, need no law or sword, since it is neither necessary nor useful for them (LW 45:93).

Nevertheless, according to Luther, Christians willingly subject themselves to temporal authority (and participate in that authority through holding temporal office) for the sake of their neighbors.

At least by 1525, Christian subjection to temporal authority is no longer, for Luther, primarily a matter of service to the neighbor. In “Against the Robbing and Murdering Hordes of Peasants,” it is clear that, for Luther, Christians are subject to temporal authority precisely as Christians. In support Luther appeals both to Jesus (“Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s”) and to Paul (Luther states that Romans 13:1 “Let every person be subject to the governing authorities” is addressed “to all baptized Christians”) (LW 46:51).

Now, if the Christian as Christian is properly subject to both spiritual and temporal authority, what can we say about the church in relationship to spiritual and temporal authority?

Temporal authority exists, according to Luther, to restrain sin and to promote the general welfare. Certainly, insofar as the church’s members remain both saints and sinners, the church would seem to have need of temporal authority to restrain sinners from taking sinful advantage of each other, within the church as much as within the world. But is the presence of

sinners and sin in the church the only reason to say that the church has need of temporal authority? If the Christian, precisely as Christian, is subjected to temporal authority, can one say that the church, precisely as church, is subjected to temporal authority? Let's test a few claims.

According to Luther's treatise "On Temporal Authority," temporal authority has jurisdiction over body and property while spiritual authority has jurisdiction over conscience and faith.

So ... Does the church have employees? Does the church own property? Does it carry insurance?

Temporal authority is enforced by "the sword," as Luther called it, or (we would say today) through political, legal and even military power, while spiritual authority is exercised solely through the Word of God. Spiritual authority is persuasive, rather than coercive; but, because of human sinfulness, temporal authority is authorized to use coercive measures to protect those who rely on it.

So ... Does the church rely only on Bibles and hymnals to do its work? Or does it also have constitutions, documents of incorporation, deeds of property, elected officers? Does it have established processes of discipline that it relies on when persuasion does not suffice?

Article VII of the Augsburg Confession defines the church as "the assembly of saints in which the Gospel is taught purely and the sacraments are administered rightly." The Gospel and sacraments are what constitute the church as church. But again, is this all that can be said?

The Apology of the Augsburg Confession notes:

The church is not merely an association of outward ties and

rites like other civic governments, however, but it is mainly an association of faith and of the Holy Spirit in men's hearts (Apology VII and VIII, 5).

If we were to define the church as only an outward organization embracing both the good and the wicked ... (Apology VII and VIII, 13)

So ... the church, in the Lutheran Confessional writings, is not merely an outward association, not only an outward organization, but *it is not less than this, either*. Just as the sacrament of baptism requires water as well as God's Word, just as the sacrament of communion requires bread and wine as well as God's Word, so the church requires some earthly "element," some structure, some tangible and recognizable expression. And just as the bread of holy communion can come in various forms – leavened or unleavened loaves as well as wafers – so too the structures of the church may vary.

This argument that the church rightly exists under and participates in temporal authority as well as spiritual authority is reinforced by an understanding of what has traditionally been referred to as "the orders of creation": family, state, and church. In Luther's own understanding, if not in the understanding of later Lutheran orthodoxy, these orders are not static. "Orders of creation" refers not to some fixed original pattern but to certain kinds of structures through which created life is ordered, that is, sustained and preserved. Some of us were taught by Bob Bertram to think of these orders as C2S2, the Creator's Critical Support Structures, and Ed Schroeder has suggested that a better translation of the German would yield "the Creator's ordainings" rather than "(static) orders of (a static) creation."

In "On the Councils and the Church" (1539), Luther writes:

The first government is that of the home, from which the people come; the second is that of the city, meaning the country, the people, princes and lords, which we call the secular government. These embrace everything—children, property, money, animals, etc. The home must produce, whereas the city must guard, protect, and defend. Then follows the third, God’s own home and city, that is, the church, which must obtain people from the home and protection and defense from the city (LW 41:177).

It’s nothing short of striking that Luther places the church within this broad category of government. Family, secular government, and the church are specific forms in which temporal authority is embodied. This does not at all undermine Luther’s definition of the church as “holy believers, and the sheep who hear the voice of their Shepherd” (Smalcald Articles, Part 3, Article XII). Just as the Christian is simultaneously saint and sinner, so too is the church simultaneously a means of God’s (right-handed) grace and a structure through which God’s (left-handed) authority is at work in the world. It’s my contention that this is not only an accurate claim about the dual reality of the church but that it is also a good and useful thing.

Crossing the Church

When I presented a preliminary form of these reflections at a scholarly seminar 18 months ago, one prominent Lutheran academic responded by saying “Nobody disputes that.” I promptly concluded that the scholar, while rostered, had probably not been in attendance at a synod assembly in recent years, nor, I imagine, does he read *The Lutheran* magazine on a regular basis. I see and hear people challenge the legitimacy of the institutional church all the time. (I’m reminded of the story about the pastoral candidate who, when asked whether he believed in infant baptism,

responded, "Believe in it? I've seen it!")

The American cultural emphasis on the separation of church and state has contributed to a privatized understanding of faith. It has also contributed to a privatized understanding of church. At its most extreme, we have the phenomenon of ordinations via internet, available with or without the start-up kit for establishing your own tax-exempt ministry. But there are examples much closer to home: consider the letters to the editor published in *The Lutheran* complaining that "churchwide" is disconnected from the people in the pew, and consider also the synod assembly resolutions calling for churchwide assembly actions to be ratified at the congregational level. The common assumption of these latter examples is that congregations are "the real church." I'm not convinced that this parochialism is even really about the congregations themselves; my sense is that, even more, the focus is a privatistic or clique-ish focus on the individuals in those congregations.

Such congregationalism has sometimes been buttressed theologically with an appeal to Augsburg Confession Article VII, as if to say that anything other than preaching and sacraments is not truly "church." For the ELCA in particular, this is a potentially divisive stance, given our understanding of congregations, synods, and the churchwide organization as three structural expressions of the church, each distinct yet all interdependent. In short (let's be blunt), there is no shortage of folks quick to say that "Higgins Road" is not really the church, or the bishop's office is not really the church. "They're just bureaucracy. We're the church." (Mind you, I'm not denying that there's bureaucracy but am asserting that the bureaucracy is also church.) This reductionistic use of Augsburg VII is flawed in several senses: it forgets that the churchwide assembly and the churchwide organization also gather regularly and centrally around word and sacrament. It forgets that the

local congregation is and does more than worship. And it forgets that the proclamation of the word and administration of the sacraments always takes place in and through actual historical institutions – earthen vessels – that exist in specific times and places with specific structures and policies and within specific contexts with which the institutional church must interact.

In recent years, there has been a renewed attention to the core Lutheran emphasis on the vocation of Christians in the world. However, many who affirm the vocation of the Christian in the world draw the line at identifying any vocation for the church in the world other than evangelism. The institutional church is acknowledged primarily as a support system for global mission, and any social or political speech or action is ruled out of bounds.

To show the limitations in this narrow understanding of the church, it's fruitful to apply the Crossings model to the church itself as text. The model is a familiar one for most of us here, with diagnosis and prognosis each progressing through three levels: from the external, through the internal, to the eternal, and back again.

D1 External diagnosis

Controversy

Controversies concerning human sexuality, authority in the church, etc, etc, threaten to fragment the ELCA (even more than it already is). Membership numbers are declining, and our membership is aging.

D2 Internal diagnosis

Infidelity

Our fault lines reveal deep doubts (Are we faithful?) as well as

deep suspicions and even accusations (Are you faithful?) The two Call to Faithfulness conferences of the early 1990s framed the question in terms of the “evangelical catholics” vs. the “radical Lutherans” (to themselves) or the “denominational Lutherans” (to the evangelical catholics), with each group claiming that it was the legitimate heir to the sixteenth century Lutheran reformers. More recently, the “Pastoral Statement of Conviction and Concern” sees the ELCA on the brink of apostasy: “we observe that the ELCA is becoming schismatic and sectarian.” And there’s more: Word Alone or Called to Common Mission? Solid Rock or Good Soil? There are factions among us. (So much so that I find myself wondering what the always-contextual apostle Paul would say in an Epistle to the ELCA.)

D3 Eternal diagnosis

Whose church? Whose body?

In the end, God says, as in the old Burger King commercial, “Have it your way,” and there’s no good news for us sinners in that! What’s the God-sized problem here? I think it’s that we want to define and defend the church on our own terms. The problem is not just the opposition between “our church” and “your church” but finally the opposition between “our church” and God’s church. If we win this battle, we lose the war. When we fail to discern the body of Christ, in all its members, we bring judgment upon ourselves. When we dis-member ourselves from the one body of Christ, who then will deliver us from this our own body of death?

P1 Eternal prognosis / solution (God in Christ for the church)

Root of church as body of Christ, crucified and risen

The church is the body of Christ, the crucified and risen one.

As God in Christ reconciled the world to Godself, taking upon himself the sins of the world, so too the Holy Spirit calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the church on earth. “One holy Christian church will be and remain forever.” Neither the gates of hell, nor our internal doubts and our external squabbings, can prevail against it. And it is to this church, this body, that we have been joined through baptism into the death and resurrection of Christ.

***P2 Internal solution (God in Christ in the church)
The faith-full solution is the church as the
assembly constituted by and gathered around the
Gospel and sacraments.***

Consider P2, the internal solution, as an expression of Augsburg Confession VII. Rooted in the body of Christ, the “shoots” of the church are our actual assemblies around Word and sacrament.

***P3 External solution (God in Christ in the world
through the church)***

The Crossings model is not complete until it bears fruit. Aye, there’s the rub, for it’s precisely our disagreements about the fruit that fuel our controversies, which takes us right back to our initial diagnosis. The church, like the Christian individual, remains in this life *simul iustus et peccator*.

Given this analysis, it seems to me that one way of describing the state of church life today is to say that many of our operative ecclesiologies are marred by a gap (if not a wall) between P2 and P3.

Some of those who are quick to quote Augsburg Confession VII on the unity of the church through Word and sacrament never move beyond P2. (I’m thinking here particularly of the response of

theologians such as the late Gerhard Forde to ELCA ecumenical proposals.) There's sap running through the veins of the church, but it's not allowed to bear fruit outside the sanctuary.

Then there are those (on both the right and the left, interestingly enough) who are willing to talk accurately enough about the external responsibilities and the institutional character of the church (P3 sorts of externals) ... but in such a way that those matters are disconnected from the root. This is more obvious perhaps among the peace and justice lobby, who commend good works but often as got-to mandates rather than get-to fruits of faith. I think the situation is similar with the "home to Rome" folks (those Lutherans who have been received into membership with the Roman Catholic Church as well as those who remain Lutheran but see reunion with the church of Rome as the ultimate ecumenical goal); these, it seems to me, commend a certain form of church structure for reasons that are at least as historically conditioned as they are theologically rooted. Whatever may have been the case in the 1530 attempt to reform the church while preserving its unity, it is simply a fact that today the Roman Catholic Church is one denomination among other Christian denominations. Neither of these approaches – justice or unity – seems faithful to Philip Melanchthon's insistence in Apology IV that evangelicals commend works (and I include structures and policies within this category) without losing the promise. In a passage oft-cited in the Apology, John 15:5, Jesus tells the disciples, "Apart from me you can do nothing." In other words, without being rooted in the vine, without being connected to the circulatory system, we will not bear good fruit.

Within a Crossings framework, the P3 fruits are the actions of the institutional church in the world. They are, if you will, the external expression of the internal solution. It seems to me that what's needed for the life and mission of the church today

is a clearer articulation both of the *fruits* of the church in and for the world in all the particularities of our contexts *and* a consistent proclamation of the *ways* those fruits are continually rooted in the church's identity as the body of Christ, watered and nourished through Word and sacrament. Like the individual Christian, who is a citizen both of the church and of the world, the church as a civic institution, as a structure for the ordering of creation, will bear fruit in the world. These fruits, broadly considered, relate to all expressions of the church: from the soup kitchen sponsored by the local congregation all the way to the church's social statements, the socially responsible investing of church pension funds, and open letters from the presiding bishop on matters of public concern. (Not to mention the role the institutional church plays as, for example, a consumer of health care, insurance, etc.)

In short, the Augsburg Aha! frees us not only to be the church *per se* but to be the church in the world. Freed from the need to justify our ecclesiologies and our ecclesiastical structures, and to justify ourselves by getting them all right, we get to bear fruit. We get to create structures that will serve the church's mission. Honest-to-God Gospel gives us honest-to-God law, not only the honest-to-God theological use of the law which condemns us and all our efforts at self-justification but also the honest-to-God civil use of the law which we are empowered to use, as God's faithful stewards, for the ordering of creation, in ways that serve church, world, and neighbor. The church, precisely as the assembly among whom Gospel is preached and sacraments administered, rooted in the crucified and risen Christ, is freed also to be a civil institution in the civic arena. Like it or not, the institutional church has temporal authority. It interacts with the other institutions through which God is at work ordering the created world. The Augsburg

Confession condemns the church's use of temporal authority insofar as the church claims ultimacy for that authority, either vis-à-vis God's Gospel authority or vis-à-vis other legitimate temporal authorities. It acknowledges, however, that the institutional church (the precise reference is to bishops) may well possess temporal authority "by human right." Such authority is, by definition, provisional. It is subject to change and subject to error, but it exists. We get to have this treasure in earthen vessels. We *get to* have bishops. We get to formulate social statements. What we say in them is a matter for our best reasoned discourse, but we get to do so.

God works through means. God works faith through Word and sacrament. God works sustenance for the world through the provisional, historical structures. If state, family, and church are orders of creation, by which we mean kinds of structures through which created life is sustained and preserved, then we have some warrant for a two kingdoms ecclesiology, or, in Crossings language, for a church that is concerned not only with faith but with fruit. While the faith in Christ created and sustained through Word and sacrament meets our deepest needs, the external problems of the church in the world are still real and still there. Just as we are not disembodied souls, neither is the church just a spiritual epiphenomenon. When Jesus commands Peter, "Feed my sheep," might that not include literal fodder for hungry bellies?

We have long recognized that government is an order of creation, yet specific forms of government are malleable; no one insists that only a single ideal form of government is acceptable. Similarly, the institutional structures and policies of the church are malleable. One of the strengths of Lutheran ecclesiology from the beginning has been its adaptability. Specific contexts evoke specific structures and policies.⁴ The church has the freedom to shape and to reshape its institutional

life. The challenge, to paraphrase Apology IV, is how to commend church structures and policies without losing the promise and how to determine which particular structures and policies will best serve us and God's created world. The criterion is what serves the ministry of Gospel.

Roots, Shoots, and Fruits: But Which Ones?

Formula of Concord Article X is labeled:

X. The Ecclesiastical Rites That Are Called Adiaphora or Things Indifferent

Those of us who were fortunate enough to study the Confessions with our departed colleague and teacher Bob Bertram were taught to frame this article contextually: not adiaphora in a vacuum but, in the context of the 16th century adiaphoristic controversies, "When is an adiaphoron no longer an adiaphoron." In times of persecution, when the Gospel itself is at stake, those externals that would otherwise qualify as adiaphora are no longer indifferent things:

Nor do we include among truly free adiaphora or things indifferent those ceremonies which give or (to avoid persecution) are designed to give the impression that our religion does not differ greatly from that of the papists, or that we are not seriously opposed to it. Nor are such rites matters of indifference when these ceremonies are intended to create the illusion (or are demanded or agreed to with that intention) that these two opposing religions have been brought into agreement and become one body, or that a return to the papacy and an apostasy from the pure doctrine of the Gospel and from true religion has taken place or will allegedly result little by little from these ceremonies (FC X:5).

This very point was one of the centers of debate concerning the

proposal (and eventual decision) for the ELCA to enter into the historic episcopate as part of our full communion agreement with the Episcopal Church. Opponents of “Called to Common Mission” argued that adopting the historic episcopate undermined Augsburg Confession VII’s witness that Word and sacrament are “sufficient” for the unity of the church and that the very fact that ordination by bishops was being made a requirement made it illegitimate. While I am not unsympathetic to this point of view, I find it finally problematic.

The institutional church has established plenty of other requirements over time. Clinical Pastoral Education, for example, is a requirement for ordination in the ELCA, as it was in some, but not all of this church’s predecessor bodies. While there may be a few of us in the room who are grateful to have slipped in before the rules changed, I have never heard anyone complain that by requiring CPE, the church is burdening consciences and undermining the Gospel by adding something to the *satis est* of Augsburg Confession

VII. Yet that is precisely the argument that was – and continues to be – made in some corners regarding ordination by bishops.

Whether or not the particular requirement of ordination by bishops serves the church well in this day and age is something about which reasonable people can disagree, but it cannot be ruled illegitimate from the outset. To return to Formula X, despite our internal fault lines – and the not insignificant quakes they generate – these are not times of persecution. It is rhetorical overkill – and a violation of the 8th commandment – to construe those with whom we differ as “opponents of the Gospel.” We need to learn to recognize when an adiaphoron is *still* an adiaphoron.

In a memorable phrase, Robert Jenson referred to adiaphora not

as “things that don’t matter” but as things that we make matter. The fact that something is neither commanded nor forbidden by God does not make it unimportant. Rather, things neither commanded nor forbidden are things that God entrusts to us to make wise decisions about. Change in such temporal matters is not only permissible but can be downright good and faithful.

Formula X continues:

We further believe, teach, and confess that the community of God in every place and at every time has the right, authority, and power to change, to reduce, or to increase ceremonies according to its circumstances, as long as it does so without frivolity and offense but in an orderly and appropriate way, as at any time may seem to be most profitable, beneficial, and salutary for good order, Christian discipline, evangelical decorum, and the edification of the church (FC X ,9).

Luther makes a similar argument in “On the Councils and the Church” where, discussing worship places and times, he says:

These matters are purely external (as far as time, place, and persons are concerned) and may be regulated entirely *by reason*, to which they are altogether subject. God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit are not interested in them – just as little as they are interested in what we wish to eat, drink, wear, and whom we marry, or where we want to dwell, walk, or stand (LW 41: 173).

He continues:

We will regard these externals as we do a christening robe or swaddling clothes in which a child is clad for baptism. The child is not baptized or sanctified either by the christening robe or by the swaddling clothes, but only by the baptism. And yet *reason* dictates that a child be thus clothed. If this

garment is soiled or torn, it is replaced by another (LW 41:175).

What Luther and the Confessions say about rites and ceremonies applies by extension to church structures and policies that are adiaphora. The ultimate criterion in the church is the Word of God. But in penultimate matters, the things that we make matter, reason and good order are core criteria.

Ordination: A Case Study in Faithful Change

The church is entrusted with the proclamation of the Gospel and the administration of the sacraments. Church structures exist to serve this function. In the temporal revision of structures, then, particularly the office of ministry and access to it, the criterion is what promotes the lively, life-giving proclamation of the Gospel. Although the office of ministry itself is established by God, the institutional church makes some determinations about the filling of the office.

Luther was clear that any man could fill the office of preacher. Not women, children, or the infirm, except in exceptional cases. There are useful lessons to be drawn from an essay by John Reumann, examining the historical and theological processes leading toward the ordination of women in Lutheran churches in the U.S.⁵ Although he does not use the word, Reumann seems to see the issue of women's ordination, to some extent, as an adiaphoron. The scriptures neither prohibit nor command the ordination of women, nor do they command it. It's important to note that this is as much a conclusion about the scriptural understanding of ministry as it is about the scriptural understanding of women. And it's also important to note that the conclusion that the scriptures do not prohibit the ordination of women, while it may seem obvious to many of us now, was once

held as just as obvious in the other direction.

Back to Reumann's analysis. Because the ordination of women is neither commanded nor forbidden, it is a possibility and therefore something about which the church must and may make its own decision. Reumann is also clear that biblical interpretation legitimately includes not only exegesis but awareness of changing historical and cultural factors. A new understanding of the texts emerged over time. It's not that earlier generations got it wrong but that a new interpretation and application of the biblical word became possible over time.

But again to understand something as an adiaphoron is not to see it as unimportant. The church's decisions about that which is neither commanded nor forbidden are informed by reason. While the church is free to ordain women or not, the only grounds for excluding otherwise qualified people from the office of pastor solely on the basis of gender seems a bit arbitrary.

I think there's a parallel here to the issue of the ordination of gays and lesbians in committed partnerships. Many of our biblical scholars have concluded that the texts traditionally associated with homosexuality simply do not say what we thought they said. Personally I have come to the conclusion that sexual orientation is an adiaphoron (and I realize that this will upset those who take a justice stance on this issue as well as those who hold to the church's traditional views). But clearly there is not consensus on this matter in the church. It remains an issue for our reasoned and reasonable debate, not because church bureaucrats or liberals are attempting to impose their own position on the church. But because the presence of gay and lesbian people in our midst who are formed by the ministry of word and sacrament and in some cases have been trained for it but are exempted only by reason of their partnered status (or desire for partnered status). It is the

presence of these committed men and women in our churches that challenges us to rethink things that once seemed as sure to us as the prohibition of women's ordination.

Folks who know me will tell you that I sometimes reflect that one of my biographical gifts is that I've never been a part of a church body where I got my way. As a female growing up in the LCMS sensing a call to ordained ministry, as someone who arrived at Seminex only months before the decision to close up shop in St. Louis was announced, as a member of the only synod of the AELC to vote against full communion with the Reformed ... I find there's a tremendous freedom in never having "got my way." I don't gotta defend any particular ecclesial status quo. I get to keep starting over, not from scratch but from deep roots, fed and watered through Word and sacrament. For what it's worth, both CCM and the ordination of gays and lesbians in committed partnerships are things I have changed my mind about in past 10 years. I – we – get to come to new understandings.

In many conversations and debates, I've heard the fear expressed that if the church makes the wrong decision, does the wrong thing, we will somehow become faithless or apostate. Well, guess what?! We've already been judged and condemned. And we are already, daily, being raised to new life. Perhaps the church needs to heed Luther's advice to sin boldly but to repent and believe in Christ more boldly still. Trusting in the promise, we are free to act, to succeed or to fail, and to act anew.

In the coming of the kingdom, the church (both as a temporal institution and as the community constituted by Word and sacrament) will give way to the saints gathered in praise around the throne of the Lamb. The Revelation to St. John reminds us that the church is fundamentally a penultimate institution: "And I saw no temple (read: church) in the city, for its temple is the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb." (Rev 21:22)

Thanks be to God.

1 Quotations from the Lutheran Confessions are from *The Book of Concord*, ed. Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959).

2 Kathryn Kleinhans, "No Red Synods/ Blue Synods in the ELCA: Attempting to Hold the Middle Ground," available online at <<http://www.elca.org/jle/article.asp?k=497>>

3 All Luther quotations are from the American edition of *Luther's Works*, 55 vols., ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress and St. Louis: Concordia, 1955-1986) and are cited within the text as LW with volume and page number.) Italicized words indicate emphasis added by this author.

4 Church historian and former presiding bishop H. George Anderson describes the 1520s, 1530s, and 1540s as "experiments and adventures in church order." For example, some congregations called their own pastors, while others had pastors appointed by Luther. Early on, Luther encouraged ordination by neighboring pastors, but by 1535, the Elector ordered that all pastoral candidates be ordained by the Wittenberg theological faculty.

5 John H. P. Reumann, *Ministries Examined: Laity, Clergy, Women, and Bishops in a Time of Change* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1987), chapter 2, esp. pp. 98-100, 115-131.

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“America, Theologically Considered”

Michael Hoy

Crossings International Conference

Honest-to-God Gospel for Today's Church and World:
Why Luther's Distinction of Law and Gospel Matters More than
Ever January 29-31, 2007

Introduction: Niebuhr's Prolepticism

Over fifty years ago, Reinhold Niebuhr warned that the United States could someday be guilty of committing the same sin it perceived all too well in the rise of communism: the irony of “pretension,” or national pride.

While the United States could at one time claim the “innocency of responsibility,” Niebuhr contends this is no longer the scenario. As a community that has emerged beyond our infancy and even needing to cautiously risk exercising our responsibility “beyond our own borders,” we nevertheless run the added risk of engaging in an unforeseen turn of events stemming from “our cherished values of individualism”:

Our exaltation of the individual involves us in some very ironic contradictions. On the one hand, our culture does not really value the individual as much as it pretends; on the other hand, if justice is to be maintained and our survival assured, we cannot make individual liberty as unqualifiedly the end life as our ideology asserts.¹

For those of us who share roots in the Reformation, we must own our own part in shaping that individualist culture; but there is

also a need to clarify our differences from this national scene as Niebuhr perceived it. Luther's *Freedom of the Christian* which underscored the individual freedom that comes by faith over all authority, and Calvin's emphases on providence and blessing were both regarded by Niebuhr as contributing to the current national pride. But Niebuhr was astute enough to note the appreciative differences between the Reformation and the accents on American individualism as well as divine providence and virtue in American democracy.² For Niebuhr, the Reformation had a stronger accent on the nature of human sin, which is missing in most American- nationalist perspectives. My sense is that a closer examination of Luther, if not also Calvin, would stress faith in Christ for the individual as distinct from, and perhaps also critical of, the prevailing concepts of individualism in American-nationalism today.

"Imperialism," Niebuhr contended, "is a perennial problem of human existence."³ Truth be told, he did not foresee this becoming the central problem of the United States, though he did regard it as an apt characterization of Marxist communism. Niebuhr believed that "modern democratic nations" have and would continue to have the checks and balances on their own power by (1) distributing economic and political power, thus preventing undue concentration of one or the other; (2) bring the use of power under social and moral review; and (3) establish inner religious and moral checks upon the use of power.⁴ At the time of his writing, Niebuhr was more concerned with a nuclear showdown that would result in one or the two superpowers of that time being able to claim victory. But he did not foresee what in fact transpired in just the last twenty years: the collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and its aftermath of a declared economic victory; and the militant response of America to the perceived challenges of its economic and militaristic prowess on "9/11" (disguised as challenges to

“freedom”). Nonetheless, his opening words to his examination of American irony ring with a shuddering prophecy:

The victors ... face the ‘imperial’ problem of using power in global terms but from one particular center of authority, so preponderant and unchallenged that its world rule would almost certainly violate basic standards of justice.⁵

And his closing words would warn of a day of final doom:

if we [i.e., America] should perish ... the primary cause would be that the strength of a giant nation was directed by eyes too blind to see all the hazards of the struggle; and the blindness would be induced not by some accident of nature or history but by hatred and vainglory.⁶

The question we must all ask, as we consider America theologically today is whether our own eyes are opened wide beyond the blindness, and/or whether they have been blinded further in our current cultural milieu.

The “signs of our times” in America in the 21st Century

There has been a wealth of literature which sheds light on the American landscape, all since the dawn of the new millennium.

In the popular and provocative analysis by a former Republican strategist, Kevin Phillips contends that the signs of our times point to the decline of the American empire. He cites six signs of imperial collapse:

1. widespread public concern over cultural and economic decay
2. growing religious fervor, church-state relationship, or crusading insistence

3. a rising commitment to faith as opposed to reason and a corollary downplaying of science.
4. a considerable popular anticipation of a millennial time frame: an epochal battle, emergence of the antichrist, or belief in an imminent second coming or Armageddon.
5. A tendency to a hubris-driven national strategic and military overreach, often pursuing abstract international missions that the nation can no longer afford, economically or politically.
6. [an addition on which he devotes considerable focus in a whole section of his book] high debt levels, accompanied by corrupt politics, hubris and international overreach.⁷

While the United States may seek to put some distance between their agenda from those of ancient and modern empires, Phillips maintains that these events were recurring patterns in the empires past of Rome, Spain, the Netherlands, and Great Britain.

Phillips is not alone, however, in so categorizing America as an imperialistic identity. Catherine Keller, for example, has starkly stated: "The question is not whether America is an empire, but only what kind."⁸ Prior empires, Keller contends, were cautious not to repeat the mistakes of predecessors; but America throws that caution to the wind, and "with a kind of questioning innocence (How can they hate *us*?)"⁹ Cornell West comments, "The rise of ugly imperialism has been aided by an unholy alliance of plutocratic [wealthy] elites and the Christian Right, and also by a massive disaffection of so many voters who see too little difference between two corrupted parties, with blacks being taken for granted by Democrats, and with the deep disaffection of youth."¹⁰

But it is not only the critical voices of the current American political landscape that share a sense of the nature of American imperialism. Advocates for this imperialist trajectory can be

found in the voices from the political and religious right. Lawrence Kaplan and William Kristol, for example, argued for the providential importance of fostering the Pax Americana for the world, and happily take the mantra of “God Bless America” as a theme of our desire for survival.¹¹ Impetus for this thinking has also been promulgated for twenty years now by right-winged religious affirmations, such as the bold pronouncement of George Grant of Coral Ridge Ministries:

Christians have an objective, a commission, a holy responsibility to reclaim the land for Jesus Christ—to have dominion in civil structures, just as in every other aspect of life and godliness. But it is dominion that we are after. Not just a voice. It is dominion we are after. Not just influence. It is dominion we are after. Not just equal time. It is dominion we are after. World conquest. That’s what Christ has commissioned us to accomplish. We must never settle for anything less.... Thus, Christian politics has as its primary intent the conquest of the land—of men, families, institutions, bureaucracies, courts and governments for the Kingdom of Christ.¹²

Pat Robertson had made a similar claim in 1986: the goal is to “rule the world for God.”¹³ More recently, legal analyst and respected author of *New York Times* bestsellers, Ann Coulter, laments why it is that liberals “deny the Biblical image of dominion and progress, the most ringing affirmation of which is the United States of America.”¹⁴

To be sure, there are less polarized views that are seeking a path toward resolution that would bring parties of the right and left (or “red” and “blue,” respectively) into a more congealed harmony. Jim Wallis and Michael Lerner, for example, contend that the religious right has a concern for religious integrity from which the left could learn and for which they hope can

develop a better spiritual agenda from the left.¹⁵ And Andrew Sullivan, a conservative, can see (even as Keller can) how fundamentalism in America is not all that different from fundamentalism elsewhere in the world: "As modernity advanced, and the certitudes of fundamentalist faith seemed mocked by an increasingly liberal society, evangelicals mobilized and entered politics. Their faith and zeal sharpened, the temptation to fuse political and religious authority beckoned more insistently. The result is today's Republican Party, which is perhaps the first fundamentally religious political party in American history."¹⁶

Mainline churches, including my own, while pastorally concerned, often miss the mark of the concerns that are really closest to the American public. Don Browning, Professor Emeritus of Religious Ethics and Social Sciences at the University of Chicago, recently commented on how the ELCA in the past decade has focused its social statements on important topics, to be sure, such as homosexuality, the commercialization of sexuality, abortion, abuse and sex trade, and teen-age sex, missed are what the social scientists of our time see as the more problematic issues in real life: divorce, poverty, cohabitation, and work and family issues.¹⁷ Furthermore, while I remain an adamant critic of Rick Warren's bestseller, *The Purpose Driven Life*,¹⁸ and the religious marketing industry it has promulgated, I must admit (along with Michael Lerner) that it seems to have touched a cord of "meaning for lives," which no publication from the left has yet managed to do as effectively—even if, as I honestly believe Warren's work is, there is encouragement toward Pelagian solutions for life.¹⁹ Cornell West has, I think correctly, noted the damaging psychological effects of nihilism in American imperialism: "Psychic depression, personal worthlessness, and social despair are widespread in America as a whole."²⁰ But his own argument, like that of others I have heard, is wrapped up in a kind of cynicism as to what to effectively do about it.²¹

Theological Reflections: Crossing America with law and gospel

Because the landscape is complex, and it is still part of our current history-in-the-making, there are no easy theological answers to the problems America faces. Yet I find Niebuhr's provocative and imaginative question as a good place to start: are our eyes too blind to see the hazards of the struggle?

Let me venture here three points (there are probably more we could offer) from the lens of the law/gospel tradition for ongoing reflection and conversation:

1. Seeing the log in our own eye before removing the speck in the eyes of others: Repentance as a theme for our time.

Repentance was the emphasis of the first of the 95 *Theses* of Luther: "When our Lord and Master, Jesus Christ, said 'Repent', He called for the entire life of believers to be one of repentance."²² Among American Lutheran theologians, Robert W. Bertram and Edward Schroeder, have hit this theme long and hard. Bertram was already clear about this in regard to the American problem in a course he taught thirty years ago, during the bicentennial, with the same title for this essay: "America: Theologically Considered."²³ Bertram noted that "America is not simply 'out-there;' it is *in* us." And while Pogo once said, "we have found the enemy, and he is us," Pogo was only partially right. He did not consider that we may also be up against God. Bertram would not let us forget that theological point then, which also seems apropos today.

Schroeder has been even especially more pointed on this issue as it applies to the current American crisis. Not only in the

mantra of “God Bless America,” but in the noted failures of many that our nation (both right and left) has yet to confess, penitently, our imperialism leaves us with a Manichean civil religion.²⁴

While I am grateful (even confessionally/theologically) that the American politic landscape has shifted of late to challenge the strong-war rhetoric that had pervaded our nation for the last several years, we have still not abandoned the depth of the scope of our American imperialism. Repentance is still not the dominant word. Resolve is, even if there is a different resolve between congress and the executive branches of our government.

2. Not seeing clearly with “both” eyes (and hands) of God: the need to dispel revelationism

A second point I would raise from a law/gospel perspective, following from the prior point, has to do with the nature of seeing the problem and its solution appropriately.

Most prognosticators of hope in the current imperialist climate, while I am deeply moved by their arguments, come up short in seeing this larger scope of the truth about God as both critic and giver of promise. For example, Michael Lerner uses the concepts of the “left hand of God” and the “right hand of God” in a manner that seems strange to me as a confessional theologian. Lerner associates the “right hand of God” with the Religious Right. In this perspective, “the universe [is] a fundamentally scary place filled with evil forces,” and “God is the avenger, the big man in heaven who can be invoked to use violence to overcome those evil forces.”²⁵ This tends to “validate an oppressive, dominating, fearful way of seeing.”²⁶ By contrast, for Lerner, the “left hand of God” represents a voice for “compassion, love, generosity of spirit, kindness,

peace, social justice, environmental sanity, and nonviolence.”²⁷ For Lerner the problem is in a matter of how we choose to look upon God. The problem of Lerner’s explanation here is exacerbated by his sense, for which I would have preferred to see more evidence, that “human beings are theotropic—they turn toward the sacred—and that dimension cannot be fully extinguished. People feel a near-desperate desire to reconnect to the sacred, to find some ways to unite their lives with a higher meaning and purpose and in particular to that aspect of the sacred that is built upon the loving, kind, and generous energy in the universe that I [Lerner] describe as the ‘Left Hand of God.’”²⁸ To be sure, Lerner’s argument sounds much like one might find in either Erasmus or Schleiermacher. But his argument is weakened further by his own admissions that many of those in the leftist political expressions are lacking such a spiritual foundation. Why are these not sufficiently “theotropic”? And why is the Religious Right only “theotropic” with a vision of dominance and control? The real problem in Lerner’s assessment is that human beings are not perceptive enough of the real God at work in the world through the “left hand”(in which he has mixed elements of both law and gospel). In essence, therefore, Lerner’s perspective is revelationist—contending that our problem is with how we do not seem to sufficiently see God as good and merciful. With Lerner, I would contend for a left hand/right hand distinction, though with different understandings about the meaning of left hand and right hand. Yet the problem is not with our failures to see the real way God is active in the world, but it is a problem with the very God who is active in the world as our chief critic, from whom we need the liberation of Christ’s mercy. That would at least take seriously the half-truth evident in the Religious Right that maybe the reason the world seems so “scary” to some is that it is—theologically, and justifiably. But that is not the final solution we have in the fuller revelation of Christ’s

promise.

A similar point could be made of Catherine Keller's solution. She recommends that we appreciate the "interstices of our differences" with other people—"the between spaces, where our dimensions fold in and out of each other, in and out of God... We may read the world itself as genesis, a great poem of becoming. Let us then seek clues for our theopolitics—for the way change is initiated, the way a beginning is made—in the theopoetics of creation."²⁹ While I can be deeply appreciate and affirm her desire to promote an inter-religious, inter-personal dialogue in the world, she nonetheless understands the solution to our crisis as yet still to be discovered only by taking on the mystic, maybe even gnostic, challenge of discerning God's creational plan. How will understanding creation answer our plight? What if it only deepens our sense of the plight, theologically? Is Keller, the exegete as well as constructive theologian, grasping the biblical sense of "new creation" with all its Christological value as Paul (if not also John the apocalyptic seer) understood it?

Perhaps Cornell West, in his solutions, at least comes the closest to avoiding a collapse into a revelationist posturing. He recommends the need to return to a Socratic questioning, and understanding of justice in the Western religious tradition, and sense of tragic-comic hope as especially the black freedom struggle has come to grasp.³⁰ His solution, while not pointing as directly to the nature and work of God in the world as in Lerner and Keller, at least suggests some sources worthy of deeper examination. My sense is that if they were, we may come to an understanding of the revelation of God that brings both justice and mercy, both critical questioning as well as hope-filled answers, and the final comedy (or at least *hilaritas*) beyond the tragic.

The same concerns could be raised on how the Religious Right takes biblical literalism in such a way as to miss the depth of the judgment of God as well as the extensive power of the promises of God in Christ.

3. “Eyes on the Prize”: Seeing the Gospel at Stake

Perhaps my greatest concern today is that we are missing out on the centrality of the gospel of Jesus the Christ. This third point raises for me the most profound theological question, and one which I raise with the greatest fear and trepidation. In other words, I hope I am wrong on this point.

Along with all of the commentators on the American landscape these days, I have come to share the sense that the ideological divide in America is very deep indeed. If I had to throw my hat into the political ring, it would be more with the likes of Lerner, West, Keller, and Wallis than it would be with Coulter, Grant, Kaplan and Kristol. The former have the better argument, even for all my theological misgivings with their arguments.

Lerner and West both suggest the nature of the “unholy alliance” that has taken place between the Religious Right and the political right of American politics.³¹ Jim Wallis is also cognizant of this alliance, even seeing it as permeating the last two presidential elections, and encourages “to reassert and reclaim the gospel faith.” “We see that [this gospel] faith creates community from racial, class and gender divisions and prefers international community over nationalist religion, and we see that ‘God bless America’ is found nowhere in the bible.”³²

Having recently finished editing Robert W. Bertram’s book, *A Time for Confessing*, I wonder as I read such analyses whether

there is something about the nature of *status confessionis* in our current American imperialist crisis.

Bertram's examination was based on the Reformers' concept of *status confessionis* especially in Formula of Concord, Article 10. From his analysis of that confessional crisis and others in church history, Bertram elaborates six criteria about what constitutes "a time for confessing":

- 1) there are *witnesses* who are on trial for their faith, oppressed by authority, usually the church's own; but it is not only they who are persecuted, but the gospel itself;
- 2) these witnesses point to *the authority of the Gospel as authority enough* for the church's life and unity;
- 3) their witness is profoundly *ecumenical*, shared by the whole faithful church;
- 4) these witnesses, by their faithful testimony, *reprioritize* the evangelical authority of the church so that is not confused with the temporal authority of the law, and vice versa, the temporal authority of the law is not confused with the gospel.
- 5) these witnesses *appeal for and to the oppressed* who are afflicted in this time of oppression (which is also a time for confessing); and
- 6) no one is more aware of their *ambiguous certitude* in making this confession than the confessors themselves—but they are nonetheless right in making their confession.

Let me start with a qualification: any sense of connection between these criteria of *status confessionis* and our current crisis has not been fully established; and for that I would say, thank God. But there are signs, and I think deeply concerning signs, that legalistic and political agendas are already finding ways to permeate the church at many and varied levels, raising the stakes on what Cornell West sees as a matter of grave

concern: "We are losing the very value of dialogue—especially respectful communication—in the name of the sheer force of naked power."³³ I would say that is not only the value of dialogue, but the value of the gospel.

Futurists Marian Salzman and Ira Matathia have prognosticated that the religious trends in America in 2007 will include

- 1) a values-based culture war where people will continue to use religion to define where and how they live;
- 2) a trend of "us vs. them" that will divide not only denominations but also congregations and even households, particularly on the battle over gay rights, civil unions, and the definition of marriage;
- 3) a continuing trend toward a mainstream of Christian rock as the dominant metaphor for worship;
- 4) a continued blurring of church and state, such that Thomas Jefferson's wall between these entities will become even more fragile;
- 5) the increasing marketing of religion as big business, with churches serving more as distribution channels for their product and congregations as word-of-mouth promoters;
- 6) inversely, the commercialization of religion as a place for big businesses to promote their brand identities in the hearts and minds of congregations—both Christian and Muslim.³⁴

We can hope they are wrong. Or we can take it seriously enough to question whether such trends should and ought to be perceived as alarming for us all. When do we start calling these trends of legalism, exclusivism, culturalism, anti-intellectualism, consumerism and market-driven ideologies by what they really have become: alien gospels that seek to grasp the heart and soul of the church at large? If these trends continue, they will certainly divide us even further as a nation. But my concern is that they may also divide the churches of America.

If such is the case, the American churches must take off the blinders and look with eyes wide open, through the lens of the One who was crucified and risen for her very being, and confess that there is only One-Gospel-and-Sacraments that can be our enduring source of unity and hope. And that promise is for all.

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20 West, 26.

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27 Ibid., 5-6.

28 Ibid., 2.

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The Congregational Leader: Gospel Shaping The Congregation

Crossings International Conference
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Steven E. Albertin
Christ Church
The Lutheran Church of Zionsville
Zionsville, Indiana

The Context and The Problem

In the free-market entrepreneurialism of American culture, it is all too easy for congregations abandon their unique identity as manifestations of the Body of Christ and succumb to the temptation to compete with the big business of American religion. In the big business of American religion, congregations become religious franchises marketing their religious services in search of improving their bottom line. The pastor becomes the CEO of a religious business driven by the needs and demands of the market. Leadership and management skills are an essential component of the pastor's portfolio.

In the last generation congregations have been flooded with a

plethora of church management studies and programs. Much of it is needed and helpful. Congregations certainly are social organisms of this world or, as Lutherans would say, creatures of God's Law and left-handed kingdom in this world. Of course, they are more than that (more of that below). But in so far as they are, they too are subject to the principles and dynamics that govern healthy organizations. They too can benefit from learning how these principles and dynamics function in social organisms including everything from a family to a large corporation.

Too often congregations have stuck their heads in the sand. Too often they have been infected with a kind of anti-nomian, other-worldly spirituality which has mistakenly assumed that the congregations are above and beyond such mundane matters. Paying attention to church management and leadership principles are beneath the spiritual mission of the church. Of course, one of the fatal flaws of such anti-nomianism is that God's governance of this creation through God's law cannot be wished away. God's law is going to have its way with us one way or another. Pretending that it is not relevant or doesn't exist within the walls of congregations is naïve and dangerous. As a result congregations have often ignored the wisdom of sound management and leadership principles at their own peril. For example, ignoring the constructive insights of family systems theory or defying the sound strategies of management by objective not only might deprive congregations of the opportunity to be better stewards of their mission but also create unnecessary obstacles to the stewardship of their mission.

Congregations need to be as wise as serpents and as innocent as doves when it comes to the stewardship of their mission. Being wise as serpents means paying attention to, learning about and putting into use the good gifts of God's creation. And that may include the sound principles of business management and leadership theory. Unfortunately all too often congregations and

their leaders in search of some sort of spiritual or doctrinal purity choose to ignore these gifts of God's creation.

Congregations and their leaders also need to be as innocent as doves. As creatures of the Gospel they are as innocent as doves. But in order to be a successful religious organization it is tempting for congregations to abandon their identity as creatures of the Gospel. Instead they are only interested in being as wise as serpents. This is especially true for Lutherans and other congregations of the old protestant "mainline" that have been suffering institutional losses for at least the last 40 years and are desperate to regain their piece of the pie and once again become a player in American society. We long for the days when congregations were social organizations with social clout and people paid attention to us like they pay attention to Wal-Mart or Microsoft today.

I have also seen far too many cases where such management and leadership theories have literally become "another Gospel." Theology, the gospel and the spiritual life of the congregation are securely bracketed and walled off in prayer groups, Bible studies, or a devotion at the beginning of a meeting where they can be safely contained and have no real affect in the real life of the congregation. We spout how important the Gospel is but when it comes to actually shaping the concrete realities of the church's life and mission, the Gospel is ignored. It is perceived as irrelevant or impractical. When it comes to making the big decisions that affect the real life of the congregation, it is all about management and leadership, which usually is code language for the Law. Manipulation, threat, coercion and the promises of success more often than not are the ways such management and leadership theories manifest themselves. IF we would only adopt this strategy or program, THEN we could increase our market share and grow the ministry (usually in some numerical, quantifiable way). Well meaning leaders of the

congregation are not able to resist such temptations.

The challenge before the church and its congregations is enormous. Once we fail to distinguish Law and Gospel, once congregations fail to recognize that they are creatures of both Law and Gospel, the problems multiply.

Congregations are social organisms of this world subject to and governed by the Law of God. But they are also creatures of the Gospel, created by, subject to and shaped by the Gospel of God. As such they are always “in this world but not of this world.” They are always “out of step” running not only against the grain of this world but also against the Law of God that permeates this world.

Therefore, conflict will always be at the heart of a congregation’s life. Congregations will always be in conflict with their surrounding culture because that culture always lives by the Law and not by the Gospel. The “last word” in the culture must always be Law and justice. The “last word” in the church must always be Gospel and mercy. The two can never be compromised and some how mixed together in some unconflicted “third way.”

The conflict can only be resolved in the proclamation of the Gospel and the repentance and faith it creates.

Gospel Shaping Leadership

The one Gospel and sacraments has the power to “shape” the life of the congregation in special ways that make it different from all other social organizations in this world. Therefore, everything must be ordered in a congregation so that the one Gospel and sacraments can happen.

The Augsburg Confession Article 7 makes this same point. The

church is where the Gospel has “the last word.” It is

“the assembly of all believers among whom the Gospel is preached in its purity and the holy sacraments are administered according to the Gospel. For it is sufficient for the true unity of the Christian church that the Gospel is preached in conformity with a pure understanding of it and the sacraments be administered in accordance with the divine Word.”

When a congregation is ordered and structured so that the Gospel can have free course and be unfettered by legalism, amazing things can happen. The Spirit of God shatters our expectations and the congregation can break the stereotype that so many have of congregations: that they are stodgy, boring, unimaginative, self-serving, tradition bound and stifling of any creativity and innovation. Instead I found that a Gospel shaped congregation can be an amazing place of innovation, creativity and risk taking. Gospel shaped congregations can make great sacrifices for the sake of their mission and be places of extraordinary love and compassion.

What follows is very autobiographical. It will present several concrete examples of how I as a leader have attempted to shape congregational life with the Gospel in such a way that keeps Christ at the center and His good word as “the last word” in congregational life.

Core Values

During the course of my ministry there are several distinct core values that have emerged in the congregations where I have served. These values were not legislated or imposed “from above” but emerged spontaneously “from below” over a period of years as I have sought to lead congregations and build communities shaped

by the Gospel. When the Gospel of justification by faith alone through grace for the sake of Christ is proclaimed and believed, these core values emerge as “fruits of the Spirit.” When the Gospel is at the center of a congregation’s life, these core values “make good sense.” Even though each congregation is unique, I would expect that every congregation that is centered in the Gospel would reflect these values in its communal life. As a leader in the church, they have become the core values that have shaped not only my ministry but the ministry of the congregations in which I have served. They have helped me to develop a style of leadership that reinforces and supports the good news of the Gospel of justification by faith.

1) Where You “Get To”

This has become the most important core value of my ministry and the congregations where I have served. It more than anything else describes the core of what it means to be an evangelical leader of a congregation. It more than anything else describes what it means to be a congregational leader who is committed to having the Gospel shape the congregation where he/she serves.

If the Gospel is the free offer and promise of the benefits of Christ’s death and resurrection to sinners, if the Gospel is the free gift of God’s grace in Christ, if the Gospel is the good news of God’s justification of the ungodly in Jesus Christ, then reception of that free offer and gracious gift is not an obligation but a privilege. The response to such a promise can only be the free consent of faith. The response of the believer to such a gracious offer is not a “gotta” but a “get to.” It is not a duty but an honor. It is not a burden but a joy. It is not slavery but freedom.

If that is the kind of response the proclamation of the Gospel is seeking and if everything in a congregation is ordered and

shaped in order to facilitate that message, then everything in the congregation is a “get to.” No arms are to be twisted. No consciences are to be burdened. No commitments are coerced. Everything is to be freely offered and joyously given. Therefore, “Christ Church (where I currently serve) is **Where You Get To!**”

But it all begins to make sense when they begin to hear the startling and surprising offer of the Gospel and trust it: “You don’t **have to** do anything to be saved, because of what God did for you in Christ. And you **get to** believe that good news. And you **get to** live a new kind of life because you believe that good news.”

Initially the critics will think such talk is ridiculous. It seems too loose and too permissive. They argue that you can’t run a congregation that way. This is no way to run a business and no way to run a church. In the real world people need to be told that they “gotta” do this or else. They are afraid of such freedom. They don’t believe it will work. It seems too risky. How will the congregation ever get the money and volunteers it needs if “a few arms can’t be twisted?”

The real root of such fear and timidity is lack of faith in the Gospel. The only way to overcome such fear and timidity is not by scolding or brow beating but by building faith in the Gospel. The only way to build faith in the Gospel is to proclaim the Gospel. You never argue or shame any one into faith. You love them into faith.

But once the critics have been loved into faith, such a message is good news. It is as if a huge burden has been removed. It is as if they have been set free to now support the mission and ministry of their congregation, not begrudgingly or resentfully because they believe they “have to” but willingly and joyfully

with more commitment than ever before, . . . because they “get to.” Because it is something they truly want to do and hasn’t been imposed on them by someone else who knows better than they do, they embrace it with a passion and commitment that previously they didn’t think was possible.

2) Servant Leadership – The Power of Love

But a congregation is not just another organization in this world under God’s “left-handed” regime. What sets a congregation apart and is at the center of its existence is the Gospel, God’s “right-handed” regime. The congregation is created, sustained, nurtured and shaped by the Gospel. The Gospel is an entirely different kind of power and authority than the Law. Its gracious offer of God’s grace and mercy frees its recipients from preoccupation with themselves. Its gracious offer of freedom requires an entirely different kind of leadership. This is evangelical leadership. It is servant leadership that relies on the power and authority of the Gospel. This is the power of love and not fear or threat. It is leadership that does not coerce or threaten. It does not challenge or demand. Instead it is leadership that reflects the leadership of Christ. It is “cross-shaped” taking the shape and form of a servant. It does not demand the obedience of its subjects. Instead it offers itself in service. It persuades by means of love and compassion. Those who respond to this kind of leadership do so not because they “have to” but because they “Get To.”

For example, in the congregation in which I currently serve, according to the constitution I have no vote on the church council. This is very different from the two congregations in which I previously served where the pastor(s) always had a vote. At first I was surprised and uneasy with the arrangement. But now I would have it no other way. Without a vote I am more free to operate by the power of persuasion. I am less likely to

succumb to the pressures of power politics. I can be an advocate for patience, compassion and caution as issues are raised, arguments are made and options are considered. I can lobby for building consensus, for listening to different points of view, for loving one another, until ideally the members of the council can be of one mind. When that happens, consensus is achieved. Votes are unanimous, a “Get To.” No one has to be loser. Everyone is a winner.

3) Teach, Teach, Teach . . . Relationships, Relationships, Relationships

The pastor has primary responsibility to oversee this gospeling of the Gospel in the congregation. The pastor is the primary teacher and theologian of the congregation. There is no aspect of the congregation’s life that is theologically irrelevant. Therefore, every attempt should be made to “teach” the Faith and the Gospel by connecting it to the concrete and specific missional activities of the congregation. Interpreting the most ordinary activities of the congregation in terms of Law and Gospel can be a very effective way of teaching the Faith. In fact, these informal settings in the midst of the struggles of daily life may often be far more effective venues for teaching the Faith than a formal class. This “wording” and “rewording” of daily life in terms of Law and Gospel is a central function of pastoral role in the congregation.

In addition to regularly structured “teaching” in a variety of class or small group situations, the pastor can teach informally in committee meetings, during pastoral visits, youth activities and even through informal conversations during a fellowship event. The fundamental goal is always to make connections between the Faith, especially as it is interpreted through the distinction between Law and Gospel, and the lived experiences of

the congregation and its members so that people can not only experience the gracious comfort offered by the Gospel but understand what it means for the shaping of their lives. And with such understanding eventually comes the ability to speak that Gospel to others. They too can help others make theological sense out of their lives. As a result the ministry of the Gospel is multiplied. It is not the possession of a few experts but of the whole people of God who then can carry that Gospel to the problems and needs of their daily lives. Constant attention to "teaching" in all the varied "relationships" of congregational life can help to make that possible.

Congregational leaders shape the life of their congregation with the power of the Gospel by teaching, teaching, teaching and more teaching. And teaching always means establishing, maintaining and growing relationships with others. Teaching the Gospel always takes place in relationship with someone else, relationships shaped and formed by the love of God in Christ. In short, the pastor cannot be isolated in an office behind a desk. The pastor needs to be with the people in the midst of their daily lives.

Through the Gospel Christ changes not only the relationship between God and us but also our relationships with other human beings. Every and any relationship the pastor has with anyone else is potentially a relationship that Christ can transform. Hence, a congregational leader is always seeking to develop and expand relationships with others in the congregation. A leader values relationships with others. Through such relationships trust can be built between the pastor and the congregation. When such leadership reflects the love of Christ, people begin to trust the leader and realize that the leader's agenda is not personal success but genuinely caring for them. That trust enables the deepening of relationships and a greater willingness on the part of the people of the congregation to accept the

leadership of the pastor in difficult times when problems must be faced and difficult decisions made. When such trust has been established in the complexity of human relationships that fill the life of the congregation, the Good news of the Gospel and can begin to change lives and transform the culture of a congregation.

4) Living in a Messy Congregation

Life in a congregation centered in the Gospel will often be messy. Human beings are complex and unpredictable. They are both sinners and saints and will remain so until they breathe their last or Jesus comes again. Add to that the Spirit of God that blows to and fro and cannot be manipulated or controlled and you have the recipe for congregational life that can be wildly unpredictable and chaotic. But it also can be immensely supportive to its members and amazingly creative in its mission.

Precise, careful planning and conscientious, efficient management are important values in a congregation. Every congregational leader ought to want to be an efficient and effective steward of the talents and resources of a congregation. Waste and inefficiency can handicap a congregation's mission and inhibit ministry. But they ought not to have the last word in the life of the congregation. A congregation first and foremost ought to be faithful to the Gospel, to be a sign of God's coming and gracious kingdom in this world, and secondarily competent and efficient. Too often concerns for efficient management, meeting "the bottom line," following the constitution, and "we've never done it this way before" (the notorious *seven last words* of the church) inhibit the congregation's mission and ability to respond to the often unpredictable and surprising opportunities for mission and ministry that can be suddenly appear. Sometimes these legitimate concerns for bottom line efficiency ("If it's not in the budget,

we can't do it") or organizational approval ("It's not in the constitution, we can't do it") prevent the congregation from responding to genuine need and new opportunities for service. Such concerns more often reflect a faithless commitment to play it safe rather than trust in God's promises and a willingness to let go of the safety of the past for a future secured only by the promises of God.

People are finicky and unpredictable. Congregations that are dedicated to serving people with gracious promises of God will also be finicky and unpredictable. That will often push congregations to difficult places where ministry may not always be neat and measurable. There is always a narrow line to walk between being institutionally responsible and creatively available. There will always be the tension between the bean counters who want to maintain a balanced budget and the institutional stability of the congregation . . . and innovators who are always pushing the envelope, trying to serve more people, taking new risks and attempting ministries that have never been done before. This tension is healthy and a good sign. It may often mean that a congregation's life is messy and unpredictable, but it is a sign the Gospel is alive and the Spirit of God is "stirring the pot." The bean counters are necessary in order to maintain good stewardship and faithful management of a congregation's resources. The innovators are necessary to prevent a congregation from becoming complacent and to keep it alert to the constantly changing needs of a congregation's ministry context.

Congregational leadership should not be disturbed by such "messy" congregational life. If congregational leadership keeps focused on the Gospel, such tension is inevitable. Such messiness can be expected. It is what congregations "Get To" do when they trust the Gospel. When such messiness is accepted as a fact of life in faithful congregations, congregational leaders

do not have to worry about quelling the conflict or resolving the tension but can rejoice that the Gospel is alive and that the people see the tension not as a burden to be fled or a problem to be solved but a blessing to be received, a “Get To” to be enjoyed and part of the ferment that moves a congregation’s mission forward.

Congregations have and always will be messy for another reason. They have and always will be messy concoctions of sinners and saints. And that division runs right straight through the heart of every congregational member. Recognizing the reality of *simul iustus et peccator* can be both humbling and liberating. It reminds every congregational leader that just when you think the Gospel is actually working and things are actually getting better and the congregation is actually growing and its members are actually behaving themselves and success in this world is actually possible, the roof falls in. Just look at Paul’s correspondence with the congregations of the New Testament and any sense of accomplishment and progress will be chastened. Life in a Christian congregation will always be messy.

A pastoral colleague now deceased who was my mentor in ministry for many years always reminded me when I came complaining to him about the bad behavior of the people in my congregation, “What else did you expect? They are still sinners.” The good news is that they are also saints and their saintliness is not dependent upon their ability to behave or get better but on the mercy of Christ. The only way to deal with sinners is to administer Law and Gospel. Only through the careful administration of Law and Gospel will they repent and trust what they already are by the grace of God. Then, God willing, they might begin once again to live the new life.

This is a daily reality in the life of a congregation. Such conflict is also a reflection of the inescapable reality that

every day the sinner dies and the saint rises again. That means that congregational life by definition is messy. Attempts to clean it up by any other means than the appropriate application of Law and Gospel ought to be regarded with great suspicion.

The Shape of the Gospel In The Life Of The Congregation

I do not presume to be a guru with all the answers. These are not “how to” prescriptions on how to build a congregation. What follows are simply some examples of how I have seen the Gospel shape the congregations where I have served over the past three decades. The list is not inclusive. These are snapshots of how the Gospel has shaped congregational life where this leader has sought (not always faithfully or effectively) to keep the Gospel central to the congregation’s life.

They often emerged from the long and slow process of building consensus through prayer, conversation, trial and error and above all wrestling with these two fundamental questions:

- 1) “What does the Gospel of Jesus Christ have to do with this? How does this help to **magnify Christ** in such a way that people are **comforted**?

- 2) How does this **help and serve people**?

The examples which I cite below are all taken from the traditional ministry areas that can be found in most congregations. Not all congregations will be organized in this way or in terms of these categories. But the functions remain the same. Every congregation, if it is truly seeking to carry out its mission, will try to carry out these functions in some capacity.

1) *Worship*

Worship is the central activity in the life of the congregation. Nothing builds a sense of community like corporate worship. Through corporate worship congregational leadership and especially the leadership of the pastor can have the strongest influence on shaping a Gospel grounded and Gospel focused culture in the congregation. Therefore it ought to be done well. Doing it well means not only that it functions well, i.e., exhibits high standards of clear communication, excellent music and an order of service that flows smoothly and is not confusing or disjointed, but also that it “does the Gospel well.”

“Doing the Gospel well” means that the work of Christ is magnified and the comfort and benefits of Christ’s work are offered to sinners. “Doing the Gospel well” means that Christ and his work are never wasted. They are absolutely necessary for the salvation of sinners and the life of the church. When this happens, good news is proclaimed. Consciences are comforted. People are set free. “Doing the Gospel well” is the purpose of all the aspects of worship including preaching, music and liturgy. “Doing the Gospel well” is central to vital worship because it is the Gospel that sustains and nourishes the faith of the gathered community. Without the Gospel the very identity of the community is at risk.

In addition, “doing the Gospel well” in worship will help the congregation’s response to the Gospel in worship be a joyful “get to.” When the “Gospel is done well,” worship is a “get to.” The congregation comes to worship hungering to be fed by the promises of the Gospel knowing that it won’t be disappointed. When worship is a “get to,” the prayers will be heartfelt, the singing enthusiastic, the offerings generous and attendance a high priority among the members because they do not want to miss out on being nourished by the Gospel. And because of the Gospel,

the congregation joyfully raises its praise and gratitude to God.

“Doing the Gospel well” means that preaching proclaims Law and Gospel. The sacraments are celebrated frequently because they are not an “add-on” but essential to sustaining and nourishing faith. In my ministry that has always meant weekly celebration of communion and a systematic effort to increase the use of Baptism as a means to demonstrate, illustrate and proclaim the Gospel in worship. One example has been the quarterly recognition and affirmation of Baptism in worship and the monthly recognition of Baptism birthdays.

Maintaining the basic form and shape of the historic liturgy in worship is an effective tool in “doing the Gospel well.” Even if the preaching was lousy and congregational singing uninspired, the very structure and form of the liturgy still can magnify Christ and offer his benefits to troubled consciences. How many times after “bombing” a sermon does the preacher console himself by uttering “at least there is the liturgy!”

Evangelical freedom also permits flexibility in the liturgy. That might include some of the following: use of drama in a variety of forms to proclaim the sermon and Scripture; children’s messages that are not just moralistic lessons but actually proclaim the Gospel and reinforce the message of the larger service; the use of modern media and technology to enrich the visual experience of the service; music that is diverse and done well reflecting both the tastes and culture of the congregation and those from around the world. But as important as musical taste and style are, word and text must always be the first consideration, because the Gospel is a word that proclaims a message and this message is what is at the center of worship.

2) *Stewardship*

There is probably no aspect of congregational life in which the leadership is more tempted to embrace the Law at the expense of the Gospel to shape congregational life than stewardship

That is especially the case in the financial management of a congregation. For a whole host of reasons (too numerous to address here) leaders, when faced with deficits or enormous financial challenges (e.g. a building program, debt reduction, funding of additional staff or programming), will resort to the coercion of the Law instead of the promises of the Gospel to motivate the congregation. Financial support becomes a “have to” instead of a “get to.” People “have to” give their money or the mission will fail. They “have to” give or they aren’t really committed. If they don’t give, they won’t be blessed. If they want to grow in their faith, this is what they must do.

The same temptation is also present when it comes to volunteers and managing “time and talent” of congregational members. Leaders feel they need to be more persuasive. Fearful of what might happen if they don’t have volunteers for the church council or the Sunday School, they resort to all sorts of manipulative tactics including everything from arm twisting to bribery, none of which are “get to’s.”

Evangelical leaders want the Gospel to motivate congregation’s support of its ministry through its offerings of “time, talent and treasure.” Therefore telling the story of Christ and his offer of abundant love is at the center of all stewardship. **Because** of Christ and what he has done for them, **therefore** congregations **get to** give themselves away in service to others. All stewardship begins with that liberating message. That means offerings of time, talent and treasure are “get to’s,” privileges and opportunities.

If people are unwilling to give or feel that they are being coerced, the leader needs to address two things: either 1) the leaders are not “telling the Gospel” and are administering the Law or 2) they have not sufficiently identified and described the “need” so that the potential giver does not understand how their gifts of time, talent or treasure can help to meet that need.

Often in the church stewardship leaders will speak of the “giver’s need to give” which can be satisfied by giving to the church. This is just another version of the Law. It appeals to the self-interest of sinners. “Give so that you can satisfy YOUR need. And IF you don’t, THEN your need will go unsatisfied, THEN you won’t be happy.” This is quite different from how the Gospel shapes stewardship. The Gospel is not about something the giver has got to do to satisfy his own need. The Gospel begins with GOD satisfying the giver’s needs in Christ. As a consequence of trusting the Gospel, the giver is free from having to satisfy his own needs and instead seeks to satisfy the needs of OTHERS! Generous stewardship is motivated by 1) setting people free from their obsession with self through the proclamation of the Gospel and then 2) informing them of the numerous opportunities present to serve the needs of others. Those needs are represented not only by the needs of the congregation’s mission but by the innumerable needs people encounter in the callings of daily life.

Gospel shaping of the stewardship life of the congregation always does these two things: 1) It proclaims Law and Gospel. Thereby the Gospel is “the last word.” It sets people free to serve. 2) It presents to the congregation needs and opportunities to serve and describes how such service can make a positive difference in people’s lives. The beneficiary in this process is a world in need. The givers may indeed experience blessings and feel good about themselves. They may make a

difference in the world. But when that becomes the motivator of the process, it is no longer Gospel. It is the Law. And the Law will either appeal to pride or accuse the conscience for not doing enough. And Christ is wasted and no one is comforted.

Opportunities to give and serve, whether it be gifts of time, talent or treasure, are always presented as privileges and joys, something the giver “gets to” do. If it is not a “get to,” then maybe God doesn’t want it done. Then it won’t be a “fruit of the Spirit” flowing from the free consent of faith. When it comes to recruiting volunteers, never coerce. Always be clear about the need that needs to be met. But also give the potential volunteer the freedom to say “no.” The congregation needs volunteers who “want to” volunteer and do not feel coerced or manipulated. If they do feel coerced or manipulated, they will not be good volunteers. If a leader is unable to recruit volunteers, then maybe it is because the leader has been asking the wrong people and hasn’t yet found the right one. Or (in spite of what the leader wanted and thought was so important) God doesn’t want it done.

This approach toward the financial stewardship of the congregation also calls into question strategies that emphasize the “tithe.” Often the “tithe” has been taught as the Biblically mandated measurement of faithful giving. But a motivational strategy that relies on measuring a certain percentage of giving (10% and beyond) puts the emphasis on the wrong place. (In addition the Biblical case for it is weak.) The Gospel frees the giver from having to measure “how am I doing?” to asking “what can I give to help someone in need?”

If “tithe” talk is to be used at all in the congregation, it ought to be used in a way that does not undermine the good news of the Gospel. “Tithe” could be used as a way of talking about financial support of the congregation, if it is a means to talk about “first fruits” giving or giving that is voluntary,

proportionate and systematic. It could be a helpful way to talk about making financial support of the congregation a priority of your life. One “gets to” set aside a percentage of money to support their congregation because he wants to help the needs of others through the ministry of the congregation. But when it becomes a tool to measure “how am I going?” then it becomes the Law and will create either the pride or despair that the Law always creates.

The use of the “pledge” in financial stewardship also needs to be addressed in the same way. It must be portrayed as a “get to.” One “gets to” pledge to the ministry of the congregation in the same way one “pledges” to exercise every day or be on time to pick up your kids. It is way you “get to” prioritize something that you want to be important in your life.

3) Evangelism

Evangelism too can be shaped by the good news of the Gospel. Like everything else in a Gospel shaped congregation, it too is a “get to.” It is something congregations “get to” do because of who they are in Jesus Christ. It is so much more than marketing and publicity. It is shaping everything in the congregation’s life with eye toward the stranger and the outsider. Evangelical leaders remind their congregations that everything they do is “for the sake of those not here yet.”

Gospel shaped evangelism is “a no brainer.” It is something that leaders can create in congregations with a Gospel shaped ministry. Congregations that are shaped by the Gospel are freed from worries of self-concern and the anxieties of survival. They are unafraid to practice hospitality to outsiders. They don’t worry about “what this is going to cost.” They are eager to welcome because there is always room for more around Jesus’ table.

Although the primary function of worship is not evangelism, it certainly is a primary point of contact between the congregation and outsiders, especially those who have had some previous exposure to the Christian faith and congregational life. It is extremely intimidating and highly unlikely that strangers who have had little exposure to the church and the Christian faith are going to wander into worship on a Sunday morning. Nevertheless, church shoppers often may have their first contact with a congregation at Sunday worship and therefore congregations need to be welcoming and hospitable places. That means having worship services that are accessible to the uninitiated. That does not mean that a congregation has to “dumb down in order to reach out.” Worship does not have to be reduced to the lowest common denominator and its message so compromised that the Gospel is lost in sea of banal trivialities and superficial moralisms. But worship ought to be easy to follow and not so difficult and complicated that even the average church goer is going to have to struggle to follow.

Worship ought always to be constructed with an eye to the outsider. Worship may be more accessible if worship folders include most of the liturgy and the use of multiple books is minimized. In some congregations that may mean projecting the liturgy on overhead screens and coupling it with the use of multi-media. In some contexts and depending on how it is done, this use of multi-media may make worship more accessible to outsiders and contribute to the evangelistic outreach of a congregation. In other contexts, it may not.

It continues to be true that most first time visitors to a congregation come because they have been invited by someone they know and trust. That means two things. First, the inviters are so convinced of the value of what is happening in their congregation that they want to invite someone to experience it with them. Second, the inviters are proactive. They won't be

shy. They will take the initiative and invite because they are so enthused about what they have been experiencing.

A congregation whose culture is shaped by the Gospel and is free from fear of change will consider such hospitality evangelism a privilege and an opportunity. There will be an interest in publicizing the congregation and its ministry in the community. There will be desire to welcome the community and strangers into its building. There will be a willingness to greet and welcome visitors, to show an interest in them and serving their needs.

But all of this will be a frightening burden and an unsettling threat if people don't feel comfortable with themselves, their faith and the mission of their congregation. The Gospel shapes those kinds of attitudes and makes evangelism a "get to." There may not be people lining up to join the evangelism committee, but there will be a growing number of people who feel so good about their congregation and their faith that they won't consider it a burden to talk about it. It will be natural to invite others to join them in the course of their daily routine whether they are on the evangelism committee or not. An evangelism committee with programs and strategies for publicity, outreach and follow-up with visitors is important. But the most important factor in creating a hospitable and evangelistic congregation is shaping a congregation around the Gospel. It is the Gospel that promises to set people free to welcome and seek out the stranger. Scolding members about lack of growth, their obligation to grow the congregation or their need to show the marks of discipleship and invite the stranger is only running back to the Law. It will create either self-righteous and pushy evangelists or guilty consciences and people who want to have nothing to do with evangelism because they feel so inadequate to the task.

4) *Mission*

Mission is essential to the identity and purpose of every congregation: *Every pastor is a mission director. Every congregation is a mission center. Every member is a missionary.* What drives this mission is making Christ known through the proclamation of the Gospel and the administration of the sacraments. Without the Gospel of Christ this description of mission could just as easily be a description of a McDonald's hamburger franchise

Mission is not just in some distant land to dark skinned people who speak languages we don't understand. *Mission* is what take's place on the doorstep of every congregation. When people leave the narthex and go out into the parking lot of the congregation where I currently serve, they are reminded by a sign overhead that reads, "You are now entering the mission field."

That means that mission could be in some foreign land or in the neighborhoods down the street. Such flexibility is reflected in congregations shaped by the Gospel. In my current congregation that means supporting a significant commitment to our denomination (ELCA) and its outreach. But it also means supporting a multiplicity of missions both local and international outside the ELCA. It is often chaotic and messy.

Gospel shaping leadership encourages such a multifaceted approach to mission. We have sent individuals to Asia on a medical mission to tsunami ravaged areas. We have sent individuals to work at a Christian orphanage in Salem, India. We have welcomed the leader of that mission into our congregation. We have sent individuals on a medical mission to the Amazon valley in Brazil.

Some leaders are concerned that too many such opportunities are too confusing and may create "compassion fatigue." They are

concerned that so many opportunities may drain away from the responsibilities "here at home." But if the economy of the kingdom is abundance and the ability of the Holy Spirit to move the hearts of people is endless, then who are we to say there is not enough to go around. When individuals in the congregation are passionate about certain missions and come forward with their own heartfelt and well-reasoned proposals, what does the leadership think it is going to accomplish by standing in the way? Is it trying to squelch the power of Spirit? As long as the appeals to support such missions are "get to's" and such appeals are not coercive or manipulative, then leaders are not to worry about things getting too messy or too chaotic. As long as people are willing to offer their support and it is a "get to," then Gospel shaping leadership ought to not just be "getting out of way" but offering its support and encouragement.

One of the most interesting mission phenomenon that has evolved in the congregation where I now serve is a "mission partnership" with a much smaller, urban, multi-cultural congregation located in a poor African American neighborhood some 30 minutes drive away. I believe that this clearly was a mission partnership that was shaped by the power of the Gospel in each congregation. It is a partnership focused on each congregation sharing its gifts with the other. We share leaders, staff, music, worship styles, vision for mission . . . and money. Members of each congregation have become friends and acquaintances. We worship together a couple of times each year. The pastors meet regularly for mutual support and encouragement.

What is amazing is that there has never been a resolution or vote taken by either congregation to formalize, regulate or legitimize the relationship. It has emerged gradually over the last 8 years as two very different congregations shaped by the same Gospel have discovered this common mission and this common interest in supporting each other. Because this mission

partnership was never imposed but has always been a “get to,” an opportunity and privilege, it is a sure sign that it was shaped by the Gospel and empowered by the Holy Spirit.

Conclusion

Examples from only four areas of congregational life have been cited. The Gospel shapes congregational life in numerous other areas not cited here, including education, social ministry, faith formation, and staff relations. Faithful and effective leadership in such congregations always focuses on the centrality of the Gospel. In those congregations the Gospel of Jesus Christ always has “the last word.” The work of Christ is magnified in such a way that good news and comfort is always offered to the hearers of its message and the recipients of its ministry. Leaders see properly distinguishing Law and Gospel as an essential part of this task. It keeps congregations Christian and the good news . . . good news.

Four core values are essential to Gospel shaping leadership:

- 1) Gospel shaped congregations are always places **“where you get to.”**
- 2) In Gospel shaped congregations leadership is always leadership dedicated to **service and sacrifice.**
- 3) In Gospel shaped congregations leaders are always **teaching** the Gospel and always shaping **personal relationships** with members of the congregation with the Gospel.
- 4) In Gospel shaped congregations **life is always messy.** And that’s OK.

Congregations are first of all called to be faithful and only secondarily to be neat and orderly.

At the heart of vital Christian congregations is the Gospel of Jesus Christ. This Gospel has the power to shape congregational life in ways that significantly set it apart from life in the world. These Gospel shapes are distinct and unique to the church and its congregations. These distinctive shapes all point to Christ, the heart of the church, the “last word” in its life, the content of its message and the shape of its mission.

[C5_Albertin_Cong_Leader \(PDF\)](#)

Law and Gospel in Spiritual Care

Robert C. Schultz

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The conference brochure has suggested this title as the topic of my written presentation. My intention is to attempt to respond to this assignment in a manner that may also have relevance for our discussion of Dr. Kleinhans’ presentation.

In the medical community 'spiritual care' is frequently distinguished from physical medicine or care of the body, psychiatric medicine or care of the mind, as well as pastoral care. The latter is still permitted in hospitals between pastors and chaplains serving a patient that requests their service or in a religiously-affiliated hospital in which the patient at least does not refuse it. Spiritual care is often provided with the assurance that the provider will not proselytize.

This understanding of 'spiritual care' presupposes that it may be provided by Christians and non-Christians to both Christians and non-Christians. The question then is whether the Lutheran distinction between law and gospel is relevant to the practice of spiritual care in which the practitioner has agreed not to introduce the gospel. Do the theological perspectives underlying Lutheran pastoral care raise questions that are relevant within the limitations of the practice of spiritual care? Are the questions raised by spiritual care relevant to our use of the distinction between law and gospel in pastoral care?

These are important questions to pastors because members of our congregations will often receive spiritual care independent of our pastoral care and even without our awareness. In such situations, we will probably be most helpful to our members if we are able to think of this spiritual care as a positive resource in our pastoral work.

I think that the distinction between law and gospel is a primal distinction in Lutheran theology. I follow the practice of Lutheran theologians who understood the Scripture as the norm but neither the sole source nor judge of doctrine. I follow their usual practice of beginning a systematic discussion of Lutheran theology and/or its usefulness in pastoral work by clarifying their understanding of the distinction between law and gospel. There are other forms of Lutheran theology which are

validly Lutheran even though I think they are less useful. Specifically, as a would-be systematic theologian, I distinguish law and gospel in every locus of theology.

For example, I do not, on principle, participate in the current ELCA discussion of the 'authority of Scripture.' From my perspective, were I to think the topic of 'authority' a useful concept in the discussion of Scripture, I would frame it in terms of the distinction between the authority of the law and the authority of the gospel. I am a member of the ELCA which in its confessional statement in the governing documents refers to Scripture as an "authoritative source." I think that should be analyzed first in terms of the distinction between law and gospel.

For the comfort of those who are also members of the ELCA, let me diverge for a moment by noting that the governing documents also make some four references to "pastoral care" without ever defining its meaning. Since one usage could be read to imply that we are responsible for the pastoral of the dead, we may hope that the Lutheran Confessions will remain historical documents rather than being interpreted on the basis of some later document.

I use the distinction between law and gospel to identify useful information, to organize this information, and to evaluate my work. In this, I acknowledge my use of approaches to systematic theology developed by Werner Elert.

Werner Elert's analysis of 19th century theology (*Der Kampf um das Christentum*) describes an oscillation in the relationship between theology and culture, sometimes more, sometimes less integration. The danger in diminishing integration is that theology separates itself from culture in issues related to the law and under-emphasizes those elements which provide meaningful

analogies to the gospel. When we permit that to happen, we confuse the dialectical distinction between law and gospel with the differences between theology and culture, between the Lutheran Ethos and the wide variety of cultures in which Lutherans live. In the same way that Lutheran theologians have not hesitated to frame their theology in terms of the questions and concepts available in their time and place.

My understanding of the Lutheran distinction between law and gospel is that it is a dialectical distinction. Law and gospel can neither be described nor proclaimed at the same time. The task of describing them separately is the function of Lutheran systematic theology. The task of distinguishing law and gospel in proclamation and pastoral care is the function of Lutheran pastoral care. The description of the individual and communal life that results when law and gospel are both distinguished in the church's ministry and teaching is the function of the Lutheran ethos.

Article V of the Formula of Concord distinguishes law and gospel in terms of their effects or of what the Holy Spirit uses them to do. These are operational definitions. The pastor can know the intention of the proclamation but can only evaluate whether law or gospel has been proclaimed by observing the results. In distinguishing law and gospel, process is more important than content. Distinguishing law and gospel in ministry is more important and more difficult than distinguishing it in systematics.

It would be beyond the scope of this presentation to even attempt a detailed description of how the style of theology represented by Article V of the Formula of Concord developed out of the Lutheran Reformation's response to the 15th century developments and how this Lutheran response compares to that of other 16th century reformations. The 16th century Lutheran focus

on the distinction between law and gospel was displaced by the adoption of the doctrine of verbal inspiration. The doctrine of verbal inspiration seemed more relevant and useful in the polemical context of the 17th and 18th centuries. This has led, for example, to a focus on an apocalyptic style of theology with its a-historical utopian view of creation. It also appears to be the source of the current fascination in the ELCA with defining the "authority of the Bible."

By the end of the 19th century many Lutheran theologians recognized that the earlier assertion of verbal inspiration was not merely intellectually impossible to defend but was also theologically unproductive. In fact, it required theologians to bracket out the intellectual and scientific thinking of the day in pursuing the task of systematic theology. Verbal inspiration could be defended only at the very high cost of isolating themselves from much of the world in which they lived. Many theologians chose such isolation and their history can be formulated retrospectively in terms of salvation history, rationalism, supranaturalism, and orthodoxy. Many found that they could only work in a meaningful way by choosing a new intellectual context through emigration.

Many other Lutheran theologians explored the possibility of systematic theology that began with the exploration of the Christian Faith (to use the style of theology that developed) which explored the way in which Christians could both participate in the intellectual and cultural developments of their time and remain Lutheran. The Lutheran Reawakening (*Erweckungsbewegung*) of the 19th century split along these lines.

Many representatives of this latter group focused on intellectual and cultural integration of Lutheran theology from the viewpoint of philosophy. Names such as Jacobi, Fries,

Schelling, Hegel, Schopenhauer, Trendelenburg, and Feuerbach – more recently Husserl, Heidegger, and Jaspers come to mind. Increasingly however, the task of systematic integration was assumed by persons whom we think of primarily as theologians. Names such as Thomasius, Harless, Frank, Ritschl, Zahn, Harnack (Theodosius and Adolf), von Zeszewitz, Troeltsch, Gogarten, Bultmann, Tillich, Althaus, and Elert come to mind – to indicate the breadth but not define the boundaries of this movement. These theologians share an awareness of the importance for Lutheran thought of the distinction between law and gospel and the necessity of this distinction or its elements in constructing their theology. Of all those whom I have named, Elert has the distinction of being approved by many in the United States for his Lutheranism but condemned for his theological method.

The theologian who is ordinarily identified as the first theologian in this group is Friedrich Schleiermacher. He was the first to identify his theology as a study of the Christian Faith. Coming out of a pietism that tried to merge Lutheran and Calvinist presuppositions and at first associated with the Herrnhuters, he pursued the eventually lonely path of constructing a systematic theology that would abstract from its Lutheran roots to such an extent that it could guarantee the validity of the Calvinist tradition in the Prussian Union. Disagreement with this intention that determines many of his results should not influence our appreciation of his method.

With the exception of some parts of the old Wisconsin Synod, almost all American Lutherans come out of groups that retreated to the past in various forms of pietism. I myself come out of that tradition and can not deny these roots. However, my personal experience has helped me understand that there are two Lutheran alternatives. Many of you will find it impossible for a Lutheran pastor to accept the limitations of the practice of

spiritual care as I have defined. I suggest that you will still find it a useful resource for thinking about what it is that Lutheran pastors actually do.

Because Lutheran pastors are usually to some extent concerned to distinguish law and gospel, they may find interaction with practitioners of spiritual care very useful. As presently defined, spiritual caregivers do not introduce new content into the process but ideally work with the content that is already available. As pastors, we can learn a great deal about the relative importance of process and content from working within the strict limitations of 'spiritual care.' Lutheran pastors ordinarily have clear understandings of the content of their proclamation. Conversation with spiritual caregivers may help achieve a similar clarity about process.

The discipline of 'spiritual care' can also equip us to interact more effectively with people who think of the human being in monistic rather than dualistic terms. For them, the concept of the 'soul' is no longer necessary or even always personally meaningful. To live and work effectively in the present world, we need to increasingly think of people monistically, that is, as bodies determined by human DNA that include more-or-less well-functioning brains. Increasingly, 'mind' is understood as the product of the brain in interaction with the environment. By analogy, we speak of 'spirit' as the dimension of the mind developed in interaction with the 'ultimate'—however it is defined. Lutherans have a confessional definition of 'god' in the Large Catechism that is very useful: Our 'god' is everything that we see as the ultimate source of good.

I also propose that we distinguish the present discipline of 'spiritual care' from those views of 'pastoral care' which focus on the pastor as the primary subject and on the shared religious assumptions of those involved in the process. Spiritual care is

validated by its usefulness in assisting people to interpret and give meaning to their unique experiences on the basis of their own personal assumptions. The spiritual caregiver identifies the resources already present to the individual or family and assists in using those resources more effectively.

Those distinctions may also be helpful to us as pastors when we encounter and cooperate with both 'departments of spiritual care' in hospitals and with nurses, hospice caregivers, and social workers who understand themselves as having responsibility for spiritual care and even to specialize in its practice. Pastors need to understand what they intend to do and whether the results of their work can be a resource in pastoral care. It is also possible that we may learn something from their method.

I assume that most of us have experienced the helpfulness of becoming more aware of the processes which shape the functioning of our mind and the way in which these processes have been more or less helpful in our own life. This process of becoming aware of the processes underlying our own thinking and the way in which we project our experience on to other people and to god or the ultimate may be described as a kind of 'mentalization.'

By analogy, the processes which shape our thinking about our relationship to the ultimates that we use as our 'gods' may be described as 'spirit.' Spiritual care can be described as a process of 'spiritualization' through which we become aware of the way in which we project our experiences on to the screens of our ultimates.

When I try to describe this process, I think of projection on to a screen. When I am dealing with other people I assume that there is really someone there and that the reality of the other person, the screen on to which I am projecting, corresponds as

closely as possible to the reality of the screen. My life goes best when my projections are accurate. One might use the concept of a screen that already has a pattern on it and that my projection either reinforces and clarifies this pattern or obscures and confuses it.

From the moment of our birth we increasingly experience that we have needs and that many of these needs can be met only by agents outside ourselves. We need care that we are not able to provide for ourselves. We need and depend for our life on the work of caregivers. If minimal care is not provided, we can not survive. As we observe this, we see that mothers (caregivers) are engaged in an ongoing process of reading each other. The infant can only treat the mother as though the mother is an omniscient omnipotent caregiver whose willingness to provide care varies. The infant quickly learns the usefulness of smiling and the mother tries to understand the variety of cries. In rare instances an infant is born before having developed the ability to smile. Mothering such a child is difficult. Those of us who are older and possibly eventually ourselves in need of care might also remind ourselves that it is easier to care for the older person who is appreciative rather than complaining.

Thus before we do anything, we experience that our life begins with needs and expectations. Both Luther and Schleiermacher use the example of the infant receiving care the example of 'faith.' Life begins with the experience of trust and the fulfillment of promise. Receiving care generates the expectation that care will be provided even when we have no capacity to conceptualize the care that is needed. Any definition of the care we need is shaped by the experience of being cared for. Over time, the child learns that mother is not perfect and responds more or less positively to various kinds of behavior.

This primal experience of being cared for is first spiritualized

as the fulfillment of a promise which becomes meaningful only as its fulfillment is experienced. In the course of life, we also experience that we are able to influence a caregiver. The usefulness of the care received is not determined by our eventual conceptualization of the promise itself but rather by the way in which the caregiver fulfills the promise...

The experience of being cared for creates the expectation of continuing care. The nature of the world in which we live makes some frustration of these expectations inevitable. The paradigmatic frustration of the gift of life and care creates anticipation that death is inevitable without providing any information about death itself. This experience projected on to the screen of ultimate in the process of spiritualization generates the ambiguity of simultaneously being cared for by an omnipotent omniscient gracious power that is contradicted by the frustration that very soon escalates into the awareness of death.

In Romans and Galatians Paul extensively analyzes a parallel coincidence of promise, law, sin, and the resolution of their inherent tension in the early Christian trust in Jesus of Nazareth. The more I study these documents the more I understand that I can only attempt to understand these discussions on an intellectual level limited by my perspective from my own time and place. I can not hope to ever read these documents as Paul and his opponents in the Christian community understood them. No matter how accurate my knowledge of the history and language of this controversy, I can never recapitulate the first century.

In similar ways, the life experience provides output that makes a discussion of sin, law, wrath, etc. meaningful. The experience of death is instructive about this since whether I think I really know something about death or have no concept at all, whether I think I will die or live forever, it comes.

Whether my thinking about it is accurate or completely in error, it will come.

This is the perspective from which I describe my own experience. Yours may be similar or quite different. However, I can only participate in your spiritual or pastoral care if you give me some insight into your experience. What can you expect of me as a Lutheran pastor? I will try to understand how your personal experience is projected on to the screens of wrath and grace and respond in terms of law and gospel. If you are my spiritual caregiver, I hope that you will pay attention to the distinction and observe it in your response to me. You may find some other Christian or non-Christian response helpful but do not impose it on me. Even if I ask you for something better than I already have, offer me something that corresponds to my experience rather than automatically sharing what you find helpful.

The person receiving care is always the subject of the process. Suppose that, as the subject of care, I find it helpful to confuse law and gospel. I hope that you will patiently wait until it begins to dawn on me that this confusion work very well for me and give me the freedom to become aware of that at my own pace. Then respond to me in terms of where I am rather than where you are.

As a Lutheran pastor, I can be patient. I know that the process of spiritualization will, if we both live long enough, generate questions and doubts to which the most meaningful response will explicitly distinguish law and gospel. If the subject of ministry has not come to that point, I can wait for the need for focusing on the distinction. By observing this discipline, I permit the subject of ministry to personally and not merely intellectually become aware of the usefulness of the distinction.

The dialectical distinction between law and gospel experience can be only approximated, never fully resolved either systematically or experientially. The closer one comes responding to an individual situation, the more inevitably one will fail to make the distinction perfectly. It is far easier for the systematician to describe the dialectic of the distinction than for the pastor to realize it in the actual ethos of pastoral care and congregational life.

Each individual's experience differs as do the categories in which the individual reveals this basic conflict to the caregiver. One way of distinguishing is to look at experience from both perspectives and in each perspective bracketing out either those factors which generate mistrust or those which generate trust in God. This is quite different from providing so many minutes of law and so many minutes of gospel.

The task of the caregiver is to sort out the current experience by bracketing out either those processes which have led to mistrust of God or those which lead to trust in God both in and respond to it. Two common modes are to find the explanation of the experiential conflict within one's self. One can bracket out the experience of death and any other existential contradiction of the promise by thinking of one self as being good enough to deserve the promise and bracket out the common inevitability of death as undeserved. Similarly, one can bracket out the good experience in life as incongruous accidents and focus on the negative experiences of life as being the reward of personal failure and bad behavior. Neither position is necessarily maintained consistently or in correlation to the current experience of life.

[C3_Schultz_Spiritual_Care \(PDF\)](#)

Who Is My Neighbor?

An Honest-to-God Assessment of Some Common Christian Answers

1 The following is a modest exercise, its scope more limited by far than the title suggests.

2 We will not, for example, attempt to explore the presenting question in all its dimensions. For that one wants a book, and a long one at that. Nor will we attempt a proper survey of current Christian responses to the one thread of the question that we do pursue. Here too books are called for, and also more scholarship than this writer can claim.

3 More limiting still: as the discussion unfolds we will find ourselves thinking not so much about every neighbor as about two species of neighbor, first the Christian with whom one stands in bitter disagreement, and second, the neighbor who disavows God.

4 Christians, at least in America, commonly scorn the first kind of neighbor. The second kind they undervalue. That is, they think less of such neighbors than the Word of God either requires or invites them to think. But they do this in different ways that feed their scorn for each other. We will raise the possibility that a more honest and faithful regard for the non-believer will dampen this scorn. Such is the nut of the argument.

5 These pages reflect more fully on God's Law than on God's Gospel, though the latter will not go untouched. This more than

anything speaks to the modesty of the exercise. God's proper work does not receive its due. There is more to think, in other words, and more to write.

6 May this serve nonetheless as a useful beginning to a fuller conversation. That the conversation is badly needed, not only here but throughout the Church, is beyond all doubt.

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7 The question that constitutes our title is not original to this work. Of course not. It was asked by the lawyer of Luke 10 who sought to expose Jesus as a fraud and instead brought the parable of the Good Samaritan crashing down on his head.

8 Then again, the question as we pose it here is not altogether the same as the lawyer's. The words are identical, to be sure, but we give them a different thrust. "Who is my neighbor?" For the lawyer this is a question about quantity. He wants to know how many neighbors he happens to have. For us the concern is quality. We wonder here about the nature of the neighbors we do have.

9 In posing the question this way, we stand in a tradition as old as the Jerusalem community of Acts 6. There we encounter the first intramural Christian spat, or at least the first one on record. Did anyone caught in that argument suggest that Widow A was my neighbor and Widow B was not? There being a flock of apostles on hand, one doubts this. Instead they wondered whether it mattered that Widow A spoke Aramaic while Widow B spoke Greek. The implied answer, emerging from the episode: "Of course it doesn't matter." Other questions would follow. For example, "Do I expect one thing of Inquirer A because he's circumcised and another of Inquirer B because he's not?" That question took longer to resolve, though it led, thanks to the Holy Spirit, to the same response: "Of course not."

10 Still, the present point is not whether and how such questions got resolved, but rather that no one entangled in the endless asking of them made the lawyer's mistake. Or if they did, someone else promptly set them straight. Else it could not have been a Christian argument.

11 The lawyer's mistake was to base his asking on a faulty premise, though one that appears on the surface to be reasonable, indeed more than reasonable. Try "essential to sanity." This is why countless human beings continue to embrace that premise and the question it drives. To put it succinctly, "It cannot be possible that all people are my neighbors, not if 'neighbor' is tied to rules of proximity and still less if it entails a divine obligation to love somebody as I love myself. After all, my capacity to love is finite, as is the space around me, and God is surely reasonable, yes? Who, then, is my neighbor—and who is not?"

12 As if such asking could possibly advance the lawyer's objective. He aims, says Luke, "to justify himself." But how? Suppose we start with his premise. Suppose further that, using it, we noodle our way to the following conclusion: "This lawyer has but one neighbor, his spouse." That still leaves him with the burden of loving his wife as he loves himself. But as wives everywhere will testify, in even so limited an endeavor "no man is righteous, no not one." "Amen," saith the LORD.

13 Enter the Gospel. Against the lawyer's reasoning stands the unreasonable wisdom of God in Christ (1 Cor. 2:6-7) who "died for all" (2 Cor. 5:14) and so is neighbor to all. Christians will often read Jesus' story about the Samaritan as a morality tale and so miss how this wisdom lurks at its heart. Even so they imbibe it elsewhere. They do so because they encounter the Gospel elsewhere. What is the Gospel if not the announcement of Christ as neighbor-neighbor, that is, as Jesus redefines the

term in his story, i.e. as the one who comes to the stranger's aid at peril and expense to oneself? Thus, "Unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord" who for your sake has "emptied himself" and is already busy with the next step of humbling himself, "even unto death" (Phil. 2). Go, dear shepherds. See your new neighbor.

14 This Gospel entangles Christians inexorably in the nutty conviction that as Christ is "for all," so are they—somehow, in some way. Christians across the confessional spectrum understand that to deny this or even to quibble with it constitutes a betrayal of the name one bears. This is evident in the works of mercy that all churches promote. This includes even so reclusive a Christian group as the Amish.

15 Also of the Gospel's essence: Christ died for all "while we were still sinners" (Ro. 5:8), and in that dying is neighbor as much to Thief on the Left as to Thief on the Right; as much to Caiaphas and Pilate as to his mother and the beloved disciple. In other words, his neighborly conduct is not predicated on the other's faith in him but rather precedes it, and does so with ensuing faith as nothing more than a possible outcome. Where that faith does ensue, the people it grips commonly make a habit of obeying Jesus' post-parable instruction: "Go and do likewise." Thus the old Salvation Army which, while serving Scripture with the stew, ladled out the stew also to those who made faces at the Scripture. At least one hopes it did. It could not otherwise have been neighborly, not in a Christian sense.

16 For again—more fully this time: Christ does with the definition of neighbor as he does with so much else. He turns it on its head. Its primary meaning, post-Easter, is not "the proximate other" but "the one who shows mercy" (see par. 11 above), said mercy flowing without stint to the undeserving who more often than not are also the uncomprehending. "Who was

neighbor,” Jesus asks, “to the one who fell among the thieves?” That becomes the basis of the question that persons controlled by the love of Christ (2 Cor. 5 14) are driven to raise first and foremost, as the one and only question that finally matters: “To whom am I neighbor,” or more precisely, “To whom is God extending mercy through me?” If then they ask “Who is my neighbor?” it can only be in further inquiry, as a shorthand way of wondering “What can I say of this person that I am neighbor to? What mercy does she require of me? How shall God serve her through me?”

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17 One might suppose that this new construing of “Who is my neighbor?” would put an end to all thought of using the question, as the lawyer did, in the futile quest for self-justification. It does not. As Luther twice says of the baptized in his *Large Catechism*: “We have the old Adam hanging around our necks.” Old Adam and his progeny—old Jerome, let’s say—will quit trying to justify themselves only when they’re dead. If anything the new form of the question gives them more room to romp in.

18 One of the loci of Luther’s observation is his commentary on the Sixth Petition where he issues the temptation, the very thing that our reshaped question affords. The lawyer, recall, aimed with the original question to eliminate neighbors. We aim with the newer one to examine neighbors—or more precisely, to examine the persons we are neighbor to. Miserably, examination is to old Adam’s lusts as agar is to bacteria. Examination invites comparison. Old Jerome thinks about you, then reverts in a flash to his favorite subject, himself. “God,” he prays, “I thank you that I am not like...”, or alternatively, “God, why him and not me?”

19 Where is the Christian or that body of Christians in whom

this dynamic is not operative? It drove the dispute of Acts 6, cited above (par. 8). One bets it had a hand in the separation of Paul and Barnabas. It certainly stoked the miseries of the churches at Corinth and Galatia. Why else is Paul so bent on prodding his readers there to quit regarding each other "according to the flesh" (2 Cor. 5:14) and instead to "think Christ"? (The latter phrase, Robert W. Bertram's, gets Paul exactly right).

20 1,950 years have passed since Paul put reed to parchment. In none of them has this piece of his counsel been anything less than fresh, urgent, and demanding of Christian attention. It remains so today. Why? Because old Adam romps on, old Eve cavorting with him in an endless game of comparative justification. Like schoolyard games it comes with a taunt: "I'm righter than you are!" No wonder Paul keeps adjuring his readers to grow up. As with all such games this one often turns mean. It has sometimes gotten vicious and deadly. One thinks quickly of the century or two that followed the Reformation.

21 These days old Adam's game continues as a feature of every Christian gathering. Every formal congregation exhibits it. As harried bishop's assistants will testify, in some it develops into a team sport that calls for referees. Jurisdictional conventions and assemblies are a preferred venue for the game. Few things whet old Adam's appetite more than the prospect of a vote. ("Now we'll see who's right and who's not.") Be it said that even so polite and passing a meeting as the present one is infected with the itch to play, and play we do. Is there anyone here who has not taken his or her own measure against the persons that he or she is listening to or conversing with? If so, rank her with the saints.

22 Consider further the broad picture of American Christianity. Down its middle runs a canyon that follows contours less of

confessional allegiance than of cultural location and political sympathy. On each side sit phalanxes of Lutherans, Baptists, Methodists, Anglicans, Presbyterians, Congregationalists and Catholics. One side boasts a corps that calls itself non-denominational even though it seems to exhibit a cohesiveness of confession that Lutherans, say, might envy. In keeping with current convention, let's color one side red and the other blue.

23 Notice then how Red and Blue despise each other. One sees it in the distance they keep from each other. One hears it in the labels they affix to each other, though not so much in the labels themselves as in the tones they employ when spitting them out: "Liberal." "Christian right."

24 Or among Lutherans: "ELCA." "LCMS." Utter either among a group of pastors on the opposite of the divide, and watch how the eyes roll. They do so in testimony to the one conviction that Lutheran pastors in America would seem these days to hold in common, namely that contact and conversation with counterparts on the other side of the divide is a waste of time, a futile sojourn among heretics or fools.

25 Is this a caricature of the situation that pertains among Lutherans? Yes. Still, caricature serves truth by exposing character. See *Gulliver's Travels*, or any of the better political cartoonists. Exposés are *ipso facto* calls for repentance.

26 Let Lutherans repent, they of all people. To despise the other is to laud the self. It invites one to feel rightier-than-thou and to bask in the feeling. Shall one do so while brandishing formulae that mark such feelings as disobedient folly? *Sola gratia*. *Sola fide*. Yet "Good for us," old Adam crows. "We know what these terms really mean. The others just think they do."

27 Such feelings are unneighborly in the strict sense of Jesus' recasting of the term. They interfere, that is, with the call to be a conduit of God's mercy to the other. Allowed to fester, they go a step past unneighborly to become "unneighboring." This happens when one supposes that there is or might be an other on whom mercy and attention, coming from me, is wasted and pointless. In other words, I cannot be neighbor to him, with the consequence that he is not neighbor to me. This of course is the lawyer's error, RCV (Revised Christian Version).

28 Have we been witnessing in recent decades a new unneighboring within American Christianity? It would not be the first time such a thing happened in our land. It has occurred often enough, certainly, in the history of the Church. Such times call for fresh attention to the warnings of the Neighbor against driving him to the point at which he unneighbors us. "Not everyone who says to me 'Lord, Lord...'" and again, "I do not know you. Depart from me, you [unneighboring] evil doer."

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29 Here's a thought: what if the Good Samaritan should give old Adam his comeuppance by using a passel of present day Samaritans to have mercy on his Americans Christians and show them the meaning of "neighbor" all over again? Or to put that another way: what if he should turn us from our disdain for each other by upending first our disdain for the merely other?

30 The "merely other"? That would be someone we are not obliged to recognize, however grudgingly, as a fellow Christian. The Muslim. The Jew. The New Age devotee. The hard-edged critic of all things religious. The beer-bellied boob who thinks Sunday was invented for football. So much the better if, for present purposes, we concentrate on the latter two. They have the additional strike against them that they don't believe in God

(they say) and have no wish to. If the cocktail conversation turns to “spirituality” they head for the opposite side of the room. They hold all clerics—rabbi, shaman, imam, pastor—in equal disregard. They do not pray.

31 Such people are among us in significant numbers. The website Adherents.com, counting persons who claim not to believe in God, pegs the number in the U.S. at between three and nine percent of the population. The lower figure yields about 8,800,000 people, or 1.5 million more than the combined memberships of the ELCA and the LCMS. In Australia the figure is 25% and in most of Western Europe at least 40%. One may as well assume atheism of the Swede. The non-believing slice of her homeland’s population is no lower than 46% and perhaps as high as 85%. These figures, by the way, are for 2005.

32 Reactions to such numbers among Christian groups in America will range from horror to nonchalance. To which of these extremes one leans is a key indicator of which side of the Red/Blue divide one happens to stand on.

33 The lean on the Red side is toward horror. Near the edge of the divide it will be a sympathetic horror, an impulse to weep for the hell-bound or at least a sense that one ought to. The farther one moves from the edge the more sympathy yields to hostility, the non-believer being reckoned either as tooth or claw of the prowling lion (1 Pet. 5) or else as the potential instigator of yet another outburst of divine wrath, 9/11- or Katrina-style. (See Jerry Falwell, infamously.) However horrified, whether in sympathy, hostility, or a mixture of the two, the Christian’s responsibility toward “the godless” is to convert them, or failing that, to restrain them, and by all means to keep their hands off the levers of power. To protect oneself, and more, one’s children from their pernicious influence one spends and labors mightily to build parallel

institutions and indeed, a parallel culture that both imitates and rebukes theirs.

34 Blue Christians are appalled by this. It seems impolite at best, despicable at worst. Here too, which of these reactions one evinces, and in what proportion, will indicate one's position relative to the edge of the Red/Blue divide. Matters of eternal destiny are not ones over which the blue crowd chooses to lose sleep. To do so will seem arrogant and unfaithful, such things resting in the hands of the God who provides for all God's children, wishes all to be saved, and has somehow arranged in the mystery of Christ to effect this. (Notice how bluish lectionaries will excise the nasty bits from Revelation 22.) Of pressing concern to the Blue Christian is not the wrath of God but the wrath of man and woman-child too, to be fully inclusive. Anger itself is the Enemy. It destroys peace. It postpones the peaceable kingdom. If angry Muslims are the prowler's tooth and claw, then so are angry Christians, all the more so when said Christians double as shills for the greedy bankers whose policies breed despair and anger in the city's poorer parts. In blessed contrast to these are—guess who?— the non-believers who keep stepping forward as allies in the quest for the fair and just conditions that lead to peace. Patently, there are many of these. To them the Christian's particular responsibility is not to convert but to welcome, not to restrain but to encourage. So long as they serve the cause of peace their dismissal of God is beside the point, as are their choices (let's say) of who to sleep with.

35 No wonder Red and Blue spit at each other.

36 Be it said that both Red and Blue do the non-believer a disservice. Thus neither is neighborly. If they refuse to hear this from lesser neighbors they will hear it one day from the Great Neighbor who is also the Good Neighbor, good with a

goodness that can horrify and appall. See Isaiah and Peter in the forthcoming texts for Epiphany 5.

37 The disservice that Red and Blue alike render to the non-believer is strictly that: a dis-service. Or perhaps a diss-service. Both fail to recognize and acknowledge that the non-believer is a servant of God. One might say that in their minds—in practice too— they drum the non-believer out of God's service. They do this for different reasons. For Red the thought of non-believer as God's servant is oxymoronic, for Blue impertinent. Or at the extremes, blasphemous for Red, intolerant for Blue, and in either case offensive.

38 In so stripping non-believers of their dignity, Red and Blue alike think of them as the lawyer thought of Samaritans. They do to them as the bandits did to the traveler on the Jericho road.

39 They do this, Red and Blue, from the same error. Odd as it may sound, both make too much of faith; faith in God, that is, as a condition for enrollment in the service of God.

40 Red's hand is tipped by her use of the term "godless" (par. 32). She means, of course, to describe those who carry on without thought or regard for God and thinks, perhaps, of pimps, crack dealers, and the ACLU. Does she also notice how the term pushes her toward assumptions that clash with the First Article of the Creed? "I believe in God the Father Almighty, creator of heaven and earth" who, as Jesus reminds us, makes the sun to shine and the rain to fall on the just and the unjust alike. That being so, how, strictly speaking, can one be without God? To posit that possibility is to toy with Mani's big mistake. American Christians have a long history of doing precisely this, especially in their thinking about matters of sin and morality. Making too little of sin, they make too much of moral conduct. That makes it much too easy to sort the citizenry: the righteous

from the unrighteous, the virtuous from the wicked, the believing from the unbelieving (see Jackson Lears, "Sanctimonies" in *The New Republic*, 6/30/03). From there the step is short to positing that God can only be the God of the former. The others are the children of darkness.

41 Blue overestimates faith from a different tack. He is, be it said, a postmodern pluralist, and rejoices in that. His virtue is civility, his credo that "I am as I say I am, and not as someone else purports me to be." Therefore, "If you believe there is no God, then—for you—there *is* no God, nor can you be a servant of God, nor may I or anyone else posit otherwise. That would be intrusive of your space, a violation of your fundamental right of self-definition. That would be wrong."

42 He who sits in the heavens doubtless laughs. Who but an American fool would think it that easy to dethrone him? Of course some ancient Israelites thought this too (Ps. 14:1). Luther was right. Old Adam hangs on every neck.

43 To be sure, Blue is correct in his assumption that words are creative ("I am as I say am.") Words form, define, and qualify. They establish reality. Children, hurling insults at each other on a playground, are well aware of this. They understand that the outcome of their contest will shape conditions that pertain once they return to the classroom. It will determine, perhaps, the composition and hence the reality of the sleepover that takes place next Saturday night. Thus the question between them as the insults fly: "Whose word will do the shaping?" Or more simply, "Whose word rules?"

44 Children also understand that there are words against which they are helpless. The word "student," for example. A child, refusing to rise in the morning, may assert 50 times, "I am not a student" (or as he'll put it, "I'm not going to school."). It

does him no good. All the assertion in the world will not alter the fact—for him the hard, cold reality—that a student he is. Someone greater than he has said so, and will say so again. If not a parent, then a truant officer. Once at school, believing himself still to be “not-student,” he may behave that way and refuse to do his work. But is he then, in truth, not a student? Of course not. As teachers and vice-principals will take pains to remind him, the most he can hope to be in this rebellion, this perverse quest of his for self-definition, is “bad student.”

45 Today’s question: in their thinking about the non-believer, can Red and Blue bring themselves to remember Whose Word rules? Can they do so thereafter in their thinking about each other?

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46 It would help mightily if Red and Blue were to heed an insight that both, for deep reasons of history, confession, and old-Adamic stubbornness, continue to ignore. The insight comes from Luther and his co-confessors of the 16th century. Simply put, God’s words are two, the Law and the Gospel.

47 The words are akin to each other in that both create. Both form and define reality, and then they qualify it, that is, they assign to it a quality. “Good.” Or else “Not good.”

48 The words are polar opposites of each other in the way they create. The one does so by fiat, the other by faith.

49 For the moment, put the Law on hold and consider the Gospel. It is an astounding word. To quote two of the people who were astounded first, “It exalts those of low degree” (Mary, Luke 1:52). It also chooses “things that are not to bring to nothing things that are” (Paul, 1 Cor. 1:28). Things that are? That would include the self- defining fools who abound on the face of

the earth. Things that are not? That would be the self-defining fool who is in truth what she asserts herself to be, namely, Co-Creatrix, I doing my reality, you yours. (Is she that? No, she is not, as her parents tried to teach her when she was toddling. No parents quite succeed in driving home this lesson.) The usual word for such a creature is "sinner." But notice what happens when God comes to this self-same deluded sinner and slips her the Gospel. Surprise! He *invites* her faith, the very believing she's been putting so much stock in, heretofore erroneously. God says to her, in effect, "On Christ's account I not only have a new word for you—'just,' let say—but I also think so well of you that I won't impose that word on you and make something of it without your assent. Let's turn this into a co-creating process, I speaking the word, you believing the word, and only then will it be so. Is this too good to believe? Here's my Spirit to nudge you."

50 Come to think of it, "astounding" does not do the Gospel justice. What is it if not God bringing down the Mighty One—himself—from the lofty throne and exalting the no-account fool, exactly as Mary recognized? He makes the penitent's "Amen" co-effective with the absolution that precedes it. As it is written, "The just shall live by faith." This is God's self-humbling, and God's gift to us of unmerited grace.

51 The Law, God's prior word, does not work this way. That's why Mary and Paul were astonished by the Gospel. Those who tumble to it today are often overwhelmed by the same astonishment, finding this new Word of God to be utterly unlike the other Word of God that they're used to used to hearing. d gotten used to. And so it is, precisely in its invitation to faith.

52 The Law is pure decree. "Let there be light. And there was light." "Because you have done this, to dust you shall return."

And so we do. Note, by the way, how the one decree strikes us as wonderful and the other as terrible. Our reactions to the Law are always mixed.

53 Both Law and Gospel are God's word to all people. But only the Law imposes itself on all people, as indeed it must do. Apart from Christ and the faith-inducing prod of Christ's Spirit, how can God think well enough of his willful human creatures to let it be otherwise?

54 As they think about the non-believer, Red and Blue keep confusing the operations of Law and Gospel. Because the Gospel (being Gospel) is effective only when I believe it, they assume the same is true of Law. Indeed, the Law seems in some instances to invite our assent, as in, for example, "Thou shalt not steal." But here the appearance of assent is superficial. The thief might flout that word. He is nonetheless bound by it and knows it to be true, inescapably. Watch his reaction when someone steals from him. He does not say, "Good" or even "That's OK." Red may froth about the wicked turning 10 Commandments into 10 Suggestions. But this they don't do. They don't do it because they can't do it.

55 God's Law is the Word that, from womb to tomb, creates, defines, shapes, and qualifies every human being. It does so without our assent. No one asks to be born; our withholding of permission does not prevent wrinkles. The Law also does these things for better and for worse. In Biblical language, it blesses and curses. First among its blessings is that dignity spoken of earlier. It invests every human being with responsibility. It gives every one work to do and a role to play. It enlists one and all as agents in God's work of providing for God's creation and caring for God's creatures. It does this, again, without first inquiring whether we wish to play along. Nor, for that matter, does it ask whether

we deem ourselves worthy of a position in the King's service. We are, as it were, drafted. The choice is not whether one is or is not God's servant, but only whether the service one renders is good, wretched, or merely mediocre. But in the dignity itself—human being as God's agent, God's servant—there the Law is inexorable.

56 Paul points to this when he speaks of "captivity" under the Law (see e.g. Gal. 3:23). He does so invariably with dismay. Yet there is a blessed aspect to the very captivity he rues. It keeps the world going whether the captives believe in God or not. Consider Sweden. Assume for a moment that the percentage of agnostic or atheistic Swedes, reported earlier (par. 30), is the higher of the two that were given. Does that mean that 85% of Swedes fail to serve God's creation, or, if serving, do so more poorly than the equal percentage of Americans who claim a faith in God? Are Swedes worse parents or nastier siblings? Are they poorer employees? More rampant thieves? Is justice more badly served in Swedish courts? Do Swedes blight the world more bitterly than Americans do? The evidence suggests the contrary.

57 Thinking on this, a Christian who believes in God and cares about God's world will honor the Swedes. Better still, he will thank God for Swedes, and for the quality of service that God's Law keeps driving them to render. He will pray, perhaps, that the Law would work that well in other lands, beginning with his own. While he's at it, he will also mourn the fact that all Swedes die, noting as he does so that their fate is his as well. All Swedes kick against the Law, not least in their disavowal of God. But then he kicks too—always has, always will—and with him as with all Swedes, God's word rules. God, that is, gets the last word. The question is, which of God's words will the last one be? Here and only here does faith enter as an issue.

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58 The same word that rules non-believing Swedes rules non-believing Americans. American Christians, Red and Blue, would do well to remember this. It would, as some say, be right neighborly of them.

59 Remembering this, perhaps those American Christians might begin to notice how God keeps showing mercy to them through the agency of the non-believers they live with. It may not be the mercy that forgives sin. It is certainly the mercy that fixes roads, and invents medicines, and arrests criminals, and runs the local Little League, affording one's boys the small but exquisite pleasure of putting bat squarely to ball.

60 In short, the non-believer is neighbor to us. Neighbor not in the lawyer's sense but in Jesus' sense, as the one through whom God's mercy reaches us. The mercy of the Gospel? No. But certainly the mercy of the Law. Such mercy is no small thing, as the residents of Baghdad will testify these days.

61 Speaking of Baghdad, notice how the same servant, at once driven by God's Law and in high rebellion against it, can be both blessing and curse, neighbor and felon, agent of mercy and worker of woe, and not in sequence but simultaneously; and notice further how this phenomenon will churn and multiply our reactions to the Law itself. Case in point: is it good that the Law has worked and Saddam Hussein is dead? Sure. But many are the Iraqis who long today for the order he imposed, however cruelly he imposed it. Wistful too are many Americans: soldiers' families to be sure, but also some, perhaps, who directed his downfall.

62 One underscores this on the chance that Red and Blue might take the dare and look with fresh eyes at the non-believing neighbor. One guesses that Red will have the harder time of it. She will look out her window, say, and see a knot of workers

clustered at a manhole. It opens to the sewer that drains her street. The men—one woman too—appear dirty and coarse. A car drives by, pretty young thing behind the wheel, and the men crane their necks. The leers of two are vile. She guesses their language is filthy. She doubts they go to church. Doubtless she doubts well. The challenge: can she nonetheless respect these people? Or to pull that word apart, can she re-spect them? Deem them worthy of a second look, that is? And will she let that second look be shaped by the word of God, not yet the Gospel but first the Law, the word that presents these creatures to her not merely as city workers but as servants of God? A word that furthermore will lay a burden on her, namely that she should thank God for them and for the neighborly ministrations they render, the ones that will cause her toilet to flush properly this afternoon?

63 Assume now that Blue lives two houses down from Red, and, looking out his window, sees what Red sees. Will Blue also do as Red is challenged to do? And in his re-specting of the persons in that work crew, will he make what for him is the harder move? To honor them is fairly easy. He grew up, after all, listening again and again to his father's Woody Guthrie albums. That aspect of the Law which lifts these people up makes sense to him. Not so the Law's dimension that demands much more of these people than they are putting out: that they should not swear or curse or imagine fornication, or lollygag on the job as some are patently doing. "Such things," says the Law, "are beneath you. They destroy the dignity that God adorns you with. They turn you into tawdry, unpleasant servants, and God is not amused." The question for Blue is whether he will respect these people as highly as the Law insists that he do by acquiescing in the Law's judgment on them. Or will he continue to spout those postmodern shibboleths about their inalienable right to self-definition? That would demean them and be unmerciful of him. It would make

of him a pitiful neighbor.

64 Imagine instead that Blue, getting honest about the Law, would think for once to start slipping his non-believing neighbors the Gospel, the word of Christ that so unthinkably invites them, through the fact and exercise of faith, into the co-creating role they have yearned for all along? How kind of him would that be? What post- postmodern fun to woo them into, that they should all be just and righteous simply because God said so, and all of them agreed. *Propter Christum*, of course. Always and only because of Jesus.

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65 Returning finally to give an earlier passing thought a second quick pass. What if, along America's great Christian divide, the word got out that Red and Blue alike were reassessing their approaches to the non-believing neighbor with an ear to the Word of God, both Law and Gospel? Might Red and Blue begin at last to re-spect each other? To quit leaning in their opposite directions, that is, and to look at each other with ears sharpened for fresh and surprising things that the other might now be saying? What if, in the process, Blue were to learn that Red was treating the non-believer with a new civility? Or what if Red noticed that Blue was regarding the non-believer's sin more somberly and was starting once again to preach Christ crucified and the promise of faith in him as God's fantastic gift for every human being?

66 Suppose this happened. Not for a moment should we think that the divisions of Red and Blue would cease, neither the major fissure nor the lesser cracks that divide the Christian groups on either side. We could think that maybe, just maybe, the spitting would stop and some talking begin. That would be a good thing, merciful and neighborly.

67 Suppose still further that Red and Blue, thinking through the Law as it applies to the non-believer, caught themselves thinking through that same Law as it applies to them? Suppose each were to tumble again to the great dignity that the Law of itself— nothing said, not yet, of the Gospel—assigns to the denizens of the canyon's other side? Suppose they noticed in the meantime how they've been failing the Law by disrespecting the neighbor, not only the non-believer but also that Christian of the other color? Might old Adam be checked in the games he keeps playing as the eyes turn away from the neighbor and back to him?

68 Suppose finally that American Christian, one and all, were to honor the name they bear by looking to Christ for the righteousness that the Law has stripped them of.? It's a fanciful thought, but think it anyway. Now notice how the Good Samaritan, rushing to our aid, is clapping his hands with joy.

69 Can there be a Christian of any color at all who wants anything less than that?

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Jerome Burce
Lakewood, Ohio
26 January 2007

[W4_Burce_My_Neighbor \(PDF\)](#)

Perhaps the Analogy is

Auschwitz Rather than Vietnam

Colleagues,

Since last week's posting Marie and I have seen two plays. That's sometimes our quota for a full year. One was "Heartbreak House," G.B. Shaw's icepick-jabbing—for two and a half hours—into the banality and blindness of the English pleasure class as World War I is coming over the horizon, and actually terminates the third act when the Zeppelin-dropped shells explode around their crazy house, into their lush way of life.

But blindness and banality still win. When the shells finally cease falling, one of them wishes they could have a replay of the show tomorrow night. "They were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage . . . and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away." To which Jesus adds: "But you must keep awake" [Matt. 24]

The other play was "Hana's Suitcase." It's a genius piece of work. Not all fiction either. A suitcase, modest sized, with the German words "Hana Brady Waisenkind" [Hana Brady, Orphan] from the Tokyo Holocaust Museum is on loan to the teacher, Fumiko Ishioka, of a grade school class in Japan. She's teaching a unit on the holocaust. And she's committed to get her class committed to "Never Again." The girl and boy representative students are receptive learners. They are fascinated by this suitcase. Who was Hana? What's her story? What can we learn about HER? Which sends Fumiko, doggedly persistent and charismatically ingenious, on a yellow-brick-road adventure that finally brings answers.

Hana has a surviving brother George in Canada. He's the one who can and does tell the Japanese kids Hana's story. Hana's suitcase was the one ("Only one!") the Gestapo allowed when they took the Jewish kids. Pa and Ma had been taken earlier. Hana and

George got separated. He survived. The gas chambers at Auschwitz consumed Hana, 12 yrs old.

The play is aimed at kids—especially the “Never Again” at the finale. Dozens of St. Louis schools brought their pupils to the performances. Ditto for our own congregation’s parochial school. But did they get the message? Possibly about anti-semitic prejudice, I think.

But what about the kids’ own current prejudices, OUR “anti” prejudices today? The list of dirty-word labels keeps growing: militants, insurgents, sectarians, terrorists, Al Qaeda, Hezbollah, Taliban.

It’s sounding more and more like Auschwitz. “The militants will have no place to hide,” we heard on this morning’s news as the newly-appointed US commander predicted how the Surge will finally bring peace in Baghdad. “No place to hide”—that sounds like the Diary of Anne Frank, like Hana’s Suitcase.

And it’s not simply the logistics of having no hiding place. It’s the mindset—like Hitler’s toward the Jews—that people whom we put under these labels DESERVE no place to hide. They need to be nabbed and done away with. WE need them nabbed and done away with. They are a threat to our way of life, just by being who they are. We’ve put that yellow star of David on their jackets. They are (Hitler’s horrific formulation) “Unwertes Leben.” Life with no value. Not deserving to live.

Is that Auschwitz or what?

Former President Jimmy Carter is getting lots of flak these days by calling Israeli policy and the Israelis’ ever-lengthening Wall against the Palestinians “Apartheid.” And, of course, everybody knows that Israel couldn’t do that if the USA were not agreeing to it and (even worse) paying for it. So it’s America’s

policy of Apartheid too.

But Auschwitz is even worse. And the point here is not in the day-in-day-out death numbers coming from Baghdad. The point is that our American mindset about those dirty-word people is the same as Hitler's (and many many Germans then too) about Jews. Unwertes Leben. So they die. Or if they die, no big deal.

That jolted me again as we drove home from seeing Hana's Suitcase. How could it have been possible for so many Germans to have been involved in the huge operation, the millions-of-marks logistics, the engineering to create deathcamps, the Europe-wide network to make it work—to get Hana to the gas chamber at Auschwitz? And 20th century Germans? The folks who brought us the Enlightenment? The folks who pay attention to Goethe, Schiller, Mozart, Beethoven, Kant, Bach? Catholic and Lutheran Germans?

There is no a-b-c formula for comprehending Auschwitz. You need a theology of evil—which also doesn't "explain" it, but puts the "mystery of wickedness" into the equation. Mysteries are not comprehended. You either assent or deny. I went to sleep (finally) that evening with my head rattling.

Not just about the Germans of 70 years ago, but rattling about the Auschwitz analog for Iraq. How can it be possible for America—America!—to be doing this and thinking we are doing right? It's not just the 4 years of chaos inflicted on a people one-twelfth the size of our populace, whose only guilt is that they had leaders whom we designated "Unwertes Leben," and so we opted for regime change. And now Saddam is dead.

It seemed so right, and STILL does for the majority of us in the US, even if our president's SURGE is judged to be just plain dumb. It's still SO right because they are militants, insurgents, sectarians, terrorists, Al Qaeda, Hezbollah,

Taliban.

Unwertes Leben—all of them.

But, of course, God disagrees. Not only about our evaluation, but also about the righteousness of our national hybris in exterminating them. Our commitment to making sure that “they will have no place to hide.”

And one day we too will get our comeuppance. It’s all in Psalm 2. Check it out. We too are on track to have no place to hide. To hide from God. Ironically enough, no place to hide from the “hidden” God, whose absconditus character is NOT that there is no evidence of him, no encounter with him, but that in that encounter God’s grace and mercy are in total eclipse.

You’ve heard this here before, namely, Luther’s claim that the terrorist “Turks” of his day (in no way “nice guys”), Muslims all, were the “rod of God’s anger.” For the moment they served as God’s actual agents, in rendering rightful retribution to a phony righteous, better, self-righteous, “Christian” Europe. The phrase came from Isaiah 10. The “rod” was Nebuchadnezzar, king of Assyria, tyranny personified, but for the moment the rod in God’s own hand and faithless, blind, banal Israel slotted to receive the blows.

Here’s the full quote: “Ah, Assyria, the rod of my anger—the club in their hands is my fury! Against a godless nation I send him, and against the people of my wrath I command him, to take spoil and seize plunder, and to tread them down like the mire of the streets.” [And Nebuchadnezzar lived just a tad north of today’s Baghdad.]

Linking this conviction about our nation’s impending future to the Promise of Christ may be impossible. Step one for redemption is always repentance. Do nations ever repent? Can they? might be

a better question. Lincoln called for just that in the hellish midst of the Civil War. The US Congress even passed a repentance resolution. But did it actually happen? Hard to tell. Possibly not, since God did not relent in letting the carnage continue until worn-out, burned-out, it ground to a halt at Appomattox. There is no signal in our nation today—from the president on through the supposedly “new” Congress—and even worse, no palpable voices from churches—that anyone has antenna for repentance, for even thinking of such a nationwide call.

If someone in authority in our nation—either in church or in state—is indeed thinking about it, he/she is surely not talking very loudly. FROGBA, the folk religion of God Bless America, still supports the national consensus: We are fundamentally a righteous nation that does not do wrong. Axes of evil are made up of other nations. Our president may have made some mistakes, we may have consented in these mistakes. But it’s nothing so serious as to be an affront to God. So no remorse, no repentance. And without repentance there’ll be no redemption. That’s a Biblical axiom. In Biblical language it’s called blindness. Jesus in John 9 is even more drastic: “But since you say ‘we see,’ your sin remains.”

In thinking through the Turkish military onslaught in 1529 Luther called for repentance on the part of even just the remnant, remembering that God would have saved Sodom if only ten faithful had been there. No one can tell if even ten did so in Luther’s day, but Suleiman did stop outside the gates of Vienna, turned around and went back home to Istanbul.

There is only one case (that I know of) in the scriptures where nation-repentance actually happened. Surprisingly, it was actually Assyria that repented in the Jonah parable. It was triggered when the unnamed King—could it even have been villainous Nebuchadnezzar?—donned sackcloth and ashes. But

that's the exception, and if the exception, it proves the rule: nations don't repent and so they don't get redeemed.

In Biblical reckoning that makes sense. Nation-states don't have "hearts" that could either trust or distrust God's promise. Their human citizens, however, do. These citizens are candidates to hear God's promise. Such promise-trusters survive even as their nation-state crumbles. That nation-states will crumble is a foregone conclusion. They are the stuff of the "heaven and earth that passes away." Only those clinging to the Promissory Word that does not pass away are the survivors.

I shudder to draw the Auschwitz analogy. In earlier ThTh postings about our war in Iraq, the Manichaen heresy of "us good guys, them evil guys" has focused my attention. Since Hana's Suitcase the Nazi predicate of unwertes Leben is added to the blueprint. Apart from Christ we all finally qualify, of course, as unwertes Leben. On our own no one is "good enough" to live forever. That all humans are mortal is Biblical evidence for this.

But to make it a national policy! First of all that we don't come under that rubric of "unwert" ourselves, and then that we decide who is UNwert, and subsequently go for the jugular to make sure they have "no place to hide" – isn't that the Gestapo story line of Hana's Suitcase?

Americans who say "never again" to the holocaust and its demonic ideology have a fresh case before us today. Isn't it the same demonic ideology? Some human life is "worthy to continue" and some not, and we decide who is which and take action to eliminate the unworthies. Most Germans were blind to it in Hitler's day. Are we Americans any different? "They were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage . . . and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away."

That's what G.B.Shaw's play showed. Not specific moral turpitude, "just" blindness and banality.

But Hana's Suitcase comes with judgment on blindness, when it is moral blindness. As did Jesus to the folks who denied their deep blindness in John 9. Not only, says John's gospel, "your sin remains," but, he says, when sin remains, "the wrath of God remains."

Our nation-state's political ideology and current praxis is way on the other side of God's left-hand regime for world affairs, and that puts us even further away from . . . Christ's peace and joy.

Therefore Jesus adds: "But you must keep awake" His grace promise goes with that grace imperative.

Ed Schroeder

The Future of the Church

Todd Murken

The future of the church is well known. Ultimately it is to be part of the new heaven and the new earth. "The home of God is among mortals." And "He will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more." There will be no temple, nor sun or moon, nor need of them.

Let me add to the picture that, at that point, freedom and love

will be perfectly integrated. Indeed, that may be what makes it paradise. Until then, the church's future includes a struggle to integrate freedom and love. I do not mean in the abstract, but in the concrete. In the earthy, even bodily, ordinary problems of human life, the Church wants to have something helpful to say to people about these things. To guide good behavior, but not without losing Christian freedom. But then what: to legislate from the Gospel? That may be the attempt, but that will lose both Law and Gospel. And that does not bode well for the near-term future of the church, or of its faith or mission.

My own church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, is undertaking a moral study linking freedom and love. Its title is, "Free in Christ to Serve the Neighbor."

This present conference is celebrating the saving distinction of Law and Gospel. But love and freedom are not the same as Law and Gospel. Or are they? "Love is the fulfilling of the Law" we are told, and the Gospel is freedom. There must be a connection.

The connection is worked out in the two documents from which the study begins. Each of them is about freedom and also love, and each of them is founded on elaborately distinguishing Law and Gospel. One document is Paul's Galatians, which along with Romans is the clearest scriptural distinguishing of Law and Gospel. Galatians also is called the Magna Carta of Christian freedom, saying "For freedom Christ has set us free" and "for you were called to freedom." The other document is Luther's "On the Freedom of a Christian" (hereafter simply "Freedom"). This treatise famously confesses the paradoxical theses on freedom and love, that "a Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none; and, a Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all."¹ But Law and Gospel are the heart of this treatise, as he uses that distinction to explain this paradox of freedom and love.

While in both Galatians and "Freedom" the connection of Law and Gospel with love and freedom is addressed, the precise nature of this connection is sometimes misunderstood, to the loss of Law or Gospel or both. So this paper will first explain one way the misunderstanding happens. The second half will follow Paul and Luther more closely to see how they more correctly connect the Law and Gospel distinction to the Christian life of freedom and love.

The ELCA study—and this is the last paragraph in which I will refer to it, since my intention is not to dialogue with it—begins with freedom. It is not a moral study of the national economy questioning whether the markets should have more freedom. Nor is it an investigation of environmental morality, wondering if we are too uptight concerning the environment and should have more freedom. Nor is it about freedom in the morality of personal firearms. This study is about human sexual activity. Now, contemplating the many and various human sexual activities in our country today, one might wonder if there really is need for greater freedom. One also might wonder why the study wants to begin with Galatian freedom rather than 1 Corinthians, which unlike Galatians directly addresses several matters of sexual behavior. Do we need to fear that the study-designers want a pre-determined outcome, and so have set 1 Corinthians aside because its ethic of sexual restraint does not help that cause? I confess I am uncharitably suspicious here. I have not read the study and it may in fact not promote greater sexual "freedom." But the study's impetus from freedom to service, made in the context of questions about sexual morality, puts me in mind of what I fear may be a common misunderstanding of Paul's reasoning in Galatians, even beyond this particular study, a misunderstanding that I should like to put right.

The faulty reasoning goes like this. Paul is discussing in Galatians the freedom that Christ gives. As part of this, he

chides Peter and company for their sticking with old Jewish ritual laws. Circumcision is included, but more pointedly the matter was eating kosher and for that reason not eating with Gentiles, even Gentile Christians. The upshot being that the same Gentile Christians begin to believe that they, too, must live kosher in order to be really justified. In his conclusion Paul sounds this trumpet blast in Gal 5:1: "For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery." In vv. 2-12 he argues against circumcision then in verses 13-14 puts his lips again to his trumpet:

For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." (NRSV)

The misunderstanding starts from the juxtaposition here of freedom from ritual law (circumcision or dietary laws) with his summary of the Law as love of neighbor. From this juxtaposition one could get the impression that when he says that love is the fulfilling of the Law, he is setting aside those ritual laws, which always had as their purpose a personal religious status of no value to one's neighbor. That is, *that the content of Christian freedom is liberation from quirky cultural laws and customs in order to get on with the real business of loving our neighbors*. Thus Christian freedom is the nullification of laws that do not help our neighbor.

This is the danger of trying to legislate from the Gospel. That is, using the Gospel to *reduce* the Law. "Because of the Gospel" to *change* the Law from what it is to something kinder and gentler, perhaps even more reasonable. This loses both Law and Gospel. The misunderstanding comes to re-interpreting morality

and justice, even the biblical commands of God (the law), in the light of God's love for the world in Jesus Christ.

There are two problems in this conclusion. One, that is not Christian freedom. Two, the divine will that applies to Christians still includes many laws that do not pertain to loving one's neighbor. I will probe this second problem first. A review of what Luther and Paul mean by Christian freedom will come later. Then can come an untangling of this confusion regarding Galatians.

There is a faulty reasoning regarding love. It begins with Paul's statement, Love is the fulfilling of the Law. Love here is correctly seen not to be an emotion. As our Lord explains love of neighbor by means of the story of the Good Samaritan, love is more like helping than feeling; an action to someone's benefit rather than an unexpressed emotion toward that person. The other side of the same coin is to say, since the opposite of keeping the Law is sin, then sin would be harming the neighbor. Sin could also be, since love is not optional, a sin of omission in not helping one's neighbor, e.g., the priest and Levite who passed by on the other side. So in this way of thinking, fulfilling the Law is helping one's neighbor and not harming her. While this understanding of the Law seems to follow, this understanding is incorrect. There is more to the Law than this.

As an aside, one can note that this provides for a 'leftist' rather than a "rightist" ethics. That is, morality is thought to concern only one's treatment of others. Even advocating certain social programs or holding certain public policy opinions could be viewed as a righteous action, whether anything comes of it or not. In this view public morality is important, and not private morality. Morality in this description has nothing to do with personal conduct *when it does not affect others*.

One problem with this conception of the fulfilling of the Law is the glaring omission of one's relationship with God: fear, love and trust. Another omission is personal integrity. Honesty with oneself is left out of view. The judgments of our Lord in His Sermon on the Mount are omitted: "If you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment." Again, "Everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart." Notice that the woman is herself utterly unaffected by this lustful look. In fact, our Lord's precise point is that sin happens not only in outward acts but even in internal thoughts that are not acted upon.

In the faulty reasoning, sin always has a victim. But does it? Picture an Amsterdam heroin addict with no dependents. She is harming no one, other than the relatively small cost to the nation which non-judgmentally provides her her drugs. Since she is harming no one else, is it sin? Most of us would say she harming herself. But since she is doing so willingly, is there a victim? Does she have a "right" to use heroin because there is no victim? Not a right according to the Netherlands's public policy that there is no "vice," no crime without an unwilling victim, but a right according to God? Does God have a right to judge her for her waste of the life He gave her? Is her victimless use of heroin a sin?

American culture today is sensitive to the harm, to oneself or society, of drug abuse, so that we can easily see the sin even though there is no obvious victim. Americans of the 19th century also saw sin, even crime, where there was no unwilling victim. Curiously, the 20th century and the 19th saw these sins in very different places. In the 19th there were no drug laws. Cocaine and opium had no legal restrictions. They were regarded as victimless crimes, in fact no crimes at all. However, in that century there were many, many laws regulating sexual acts. Sodomy was a capital offense. Adultery was a punishable crime.

What we have by the end of the 20th century is a fascinating switch: opiate use has been given severe legal punishments, and sexual acts of any kind have received legal permission (in Nevada even prostitution is legal). Speaking of Nevada, because gambling is seen as victimless, it is on the track of sex, not drugs: it is not only legal everywhere but our states are dependent upon it.

But in reality sin does not need a victim. We can see that as clearly regarding opiate use today as our 19th century forebears saw it regarding sex. While it is good and lawful to help one's neighbor and not to harm him, that is not the extent of the Law, whatever Paul may have meant.

This is clear enough in Galatians itself, in which freedom from the Law and love as the fulfilling of the Law are most extolled,. Hear first Paul's list of obvious works of the flesh. While many of these works have victims, the first ones, all five of them, do not victimize others but are sin for other reasons (Gal. 5:19f): "Fornication; impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery." And from the opposite side, consider the fruit of the Holy Spirit. While some of these benefit the neighbor (kindness, generosity), others do not or at least need not, including some of the first such as joy and peace.

The same point can be made by reference to the Beatitudes. While not a legal code, they do present the will of God for human life. Some refer to benefiting other people (merciful, peacemakers). Others have to do only with oneself and one's own attitude without reference to any affect upon other people: poor in spirit, mourn, hungry for righteousness, pure in heart.

Therefore, whatever might be meant by "Love is the fulfilling of the Law," we cannot deduce therefrom that any action without a victim is permitted by God. Christian freedom, then is not the

removal of all restrictions except the requirement to serve and not victimize one's neighbor.

Let me now offer another conception of how to distinguish Law from Gospel in order to integrate love and freedom. I will propose it by following Paul and Luther more carefully. First we will see how Christian freedom is not freedom from OT ceremonial laws. Second, see what Christian freedom is, as Paul puts it, freedom from the curse of the Law. With those understandings, we will be able to understand why there is confusion in reading Galatians. Finally, we will see how Luther integrates freedom and love.

OT ritual Law was controversial in the beginning of the Church. In His ministry the Lord was cavalier about Sabbath laws and dietary laws. The first, He said, is to be a benefit not a burden (Mk 2:27) and the second He abrogated "declaring all foods clean" (Mk 7:19). On the other hand he insisted He had not come to abrogate the law and the prophets (Mt 5:17). Indeed He tightens the Law, extends it, raises the bar: not only are murder, adultery and perjury crimes, so are murderous feelings and adulterous fantasies and oath-taking of any kind (Mt. 5:21-37). Alms, prayer and fasting are not only required, but these good acts must be done with the proper motivation, for reasons of piety and not of public approbation, else they lose their goodness.

This confusing and distressing inconsistency—playing fast and loose with some laws and redoubling others—has traditionally been resolved by the expedient of distinction. He denigrates only ritual laws and increases only moral laws. To define these terms, could one say that He fills in those laws that protect other people, which proscribe our treating them proprietarily, without the dignity they have as images of God? While that is part of it, we must recall what we have already learned, that

the moral Law is misunderstood if taken to refer only to affecting other people. We must be sure to include also internal anger and lust as well as the need for private praying and anonymous alms-giving. The other set, ritual laws, is perhaps easier to define. The Lord dismisses those laws that pertain only to limiting certain habits of food and work. These ceremonial laws are arbitrary: there is no reason why resting on Saturday is better than on Wednesday, or relaxing every sixth or eighth day inferior to every seventh. And, as Jesus argues in Mark 7, no food can defile a person. Thus ritual laws are made null and void, even one that is one of the Ten Commandments.

As we are attempting here to understand the value of such OT ceremonial laws, in order to see that Christian freedom is not about them, let us see another way to discriminate between ceremonial and moral laws. This way is based not on content but upon application; a very different means of discriminating, but remarkably yields the same two sets. This analysis comes from Luther.

Briefly, the problem he took up in "How Christians Should Regard Moses" (1525) was of some excited Christians, newly liberated from papal hermeneutic authority but lacking in theological perspicacity, who upon reading the five books of Moses found all sorts of laws they had never heard before and began to cry, "This is the Word of God; we must therefore obey them!" and sought to impose Levitical laws on the German people. To this Luther brought a most helpful discrimination. Yes, he said, that is God's Word; but it is not God's Word to you. To illustrate, he went on, God told David to make wars and conquer lands. That was God's Word. But it was the Word to David, not to you, and so you would be as wrong to do so as David would have been not to do so. "We must deal cleanly with the Scriptures." For that matter, Luther says, even the Ten Commandments do not apply to us Germans. Why do I say so? Look at how they begin: "I am the

Lord, your God, Who brought you out of Egypt.” Now, did God ever bring you out of Egypt? No? Well, then He is not talking to you, is He?

Now, the notion that the Ten Commandments do not apply to us because we are not Jews strikes us as odd, even while we admit that historical-critically Luther has a very telling point about original context. Further oddness is added as soon as we recall that Luther begins his own catechism with a trenchant explication of the Decalogue; plainly he does think after all that they apply to us. And in “Moses” he says as much, with this explanation. The Decalogue is God’s will and law for all human beings. It is, in fact, part of the way we are made. We are simply constituted in such a way that murder, adultery, divorce, dishonesty, hypocrisy etc. are wrong, bad for us, or in today’s parlance, “inappropriate” to what we are, and that piety, prayer, worship, faith, respect for authorities, charity, care for others’ reputations, etc. are good for us, right, even righteous, appropriate for what we are, “good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life” (Eph. 2:10). Because these laws pertain to our very nature, they are called, traditionally and by Luther, natural laws. This is very much divine legislation. As Luther puts it, the Gentiles do not have the Law written on stone tables but have it written in their hearts. This is the phenomenon Paul remarks upon in Romans 2:14f “When the Gentiles, who do not possess the Law, do instinctively what the Law requires, these, though not having the Law, are a Law to themselves. They show that what the Law requires is written on their hearts, to which their own conscience also bears witness. . . .” Paul points to the empirical evidence that all cultures prohibit impiety, disobedience, murder, adultery, perjury. The Formula of Concord expresses the same understanding of the Law thus:

We unanimously believe, teach, and confess on the basis of

what we have said that, strictly speaking, the Law is a divine doctrine which reveals the righteousness and immutable will of God, shows how man ought to be disposed in his nature, thoughts, words, and deeds in order to be pleasing and acceptable to God.²

Luther says the great thing about the Ten Commandments is that Moses there has worded the divine will so well. Thus the Decalogue is after all divine Law and will for all people, *not because God gave those laws to Moses* but because God gave those laws to all people in their very nature.

At least 90% of them. There is the exception that—in this rarest of cases—actually does prove the rule. While nine of the ten are practically universal, there is no people other than the Jews that make it immoral to work on Saturday. Luther in the catechism therefore does exactly what you would expect, he completely ignores the requirement of rest, already voided by the Lord and His apostles, and speaks instead about the need to hear and devoutly heed the preaching of the Word.

Here is a decisive thing. Luther discriminates between divine laws for followers of Moses and divine laws for all people, such as Gentile Christians. By this discrimination, whom do laws regulate, he finds two sets of laws. These are the very same two sets that our Lord indicates, by dismissing some and amplifying others, even though the Lord discriminates on the basis of the content of the laws, not on the basis of for whom they are authoritative Law. We conclude that ceremonial laws (diet, clothing, bathing, circumcision, Sabbath, etc.) are arbitrary regulations for the body and regulate only Jews who are under Moses. Obeying them has no value with God for anyone else. Moral laws, which are for the conscience, have authority over all humans: Jew, Gentile, Christian, whatever. In keeping these there is great reward.

It is worth noticing that as arcane as this historical-critical investigation may seem to be, it is a real, contemporary search. For example Ralph W. Klein has somewhere framed the question this way. In the church's questions about which sexual relations are licit and which illicit, he draws attention to Leviticus 18:19-23. In this passage there are five prohibitions: sex with a woman during her period; sex with a kinsman's wife; sacrificing one's child to Molech; sex with a male as with a woman, and sex with an animal. Klein says, sex with an animal is universally condemned. Sex during a woman's period is culturally relative. In between these two is homosexual intercourse. The question is, he says, is that prohibition merely cultural, like the latter, or universal like the former? Notice this question uses Luther's discrimination.

For our investigation of love and freedom, the point is this. Christian freedom is not freedom from Jewish rituals. As one curmudgeonly professor put it, Christ did not die to free us from the liturgicians—though that would have been a help indeed.

What then is Christian freedom? It is freedom from the Law's evaluation, freedom from the need to be righteous according to the Law, freedom from having to live up to the Law's standard in order to have life. The moral Law continues to describe and demand what is good and holy and right behavior (Ps. 19, 1, 119, e.g.), and to threaten with death those who do not conform. Christ frees us from that threat. Paul writes in Galatians:

For all who rely on the works of the Law are under a curse; for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who does not observe the obey all the thing written in the book of the Law." . . . Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law by becoming a curse for us.

Luther is more expansive, and clearer yet. I quote him at some

length, for the benefit of those who think it is Lutheran to say the Christians do not need to use the Law. Here is how he explains Paul in Luther's "Galatians:"

Therefore whoever knows well how to distinguish the Gospel from the Law should give thanks to God and know that he is a real theologian. . . . The way to distinguish the one from the other is to locate the Gospel in heaven and the Law on earth, to call the righteousness of the Gospel heavenly and divine and the righteousness of the Law earthly and human, and to distinguish as sharply between the righteousness of the Gospel and that of the Law as God distinguishes between heaven and earth or between light and darkness. . . . Therefore if the issue is faith, heavenly righteousness, or conscience, let us leave the Law out of consideration altogether and let it remain on the earth. But if the issue is works, then let us light the lamp of works and of the righteousness of the Law in the night. So let the sun and the immense light of the Gospel and of grace shine in the day, and let the lamp of the Law shine in the night. These two must be distinguished in your mind in such a way that when your conscience is completely terrified by a sense of sin, you will think of yourself. "At the moment you are busy on earth. Here let the ass work, let him serve and carry the burden that has been laid upon him; that is, let the body and its members be subject to the Law. But when you ascend into heaven, leave the ass with his burdens on earth; for the conscience has no relation to the Law or to works or to earthly righteousness. Thus the ass remains in the valley; but the conscience ascends the mountain with Isaac, knowing absolutely nothing about the Law or its works but looking only to the forgiveness of sins and the pure righteousness offered and given in Christ."3

More exactly on the issue of Christian freedom in Galatians 5, Luther writes—and I quote again at length for the same reason:

In what freedom? Not in the freedom for which the Roman emperor has set us free but in the freedom for which Christ has set us free. The Roman emperor gave. . . freedom; but it is a political freedom . . . In addition, there is the freedom of the flesh, which is chiefly prevalent in the world. Those who have this obey neither God nor the laws but do what they please. This is the freedom which the rabble pursues today; so do the fanatical spirits, who want to be free in their opinions and actions, in order that they may teach and do with impunity what they imagine to be right. This is a demonic freedom, by which the devil sets the wicked free to sin against God and men. . . .

This is the freedom with which Christ has set us free, not from some human slavery or tyrannical authority but from the eternal wrath of God. Where? In the conscience. This is where our freedom comes to a halt; it goes no further. For Christ has set us free, not for a political freedom or a freedom of the flesh but for a theological or spiritual freedom, that is, to make our conscience free and joyful, unafraid of the wrath to come (Matt. 3:7). This is the most genuine freedom; it is immeasurable. When the other kinds of freedom—political freedom and the freedom of the flesh—are compared with the greatness and the glory of this kind of freedom, they hardly amount to one little drop. For who can express what a great gift it is for someone to be able to declare for certain that God neither is nor ever will be wrathful but will forever be a gracious and merciful Father for the sake of Christ? It is surely a great and incomprehensible freedom to have this Supreme Majesty kindly disposed toward us.

We have established two important points. One, there is freedom from OT ritual regulations, but that is because those regulations never pertained to Gentiles in the first place. Second, that the specific freedom that Christ has bled to obtain

for Jews and Gentiles is freedom from the Law's power to separate sinners from God. With these, now we can untangle that confusion about Paul's Galatians.

One could think, reading Galatians, that the freedom Christ gives is from ritual Law. The reasons are these. The word "*nomos*" (in all declensions) appears nearly two hundred times in Galatians' six chapters, but it is not always obvious what Paul means. At points Paul discusses circumcision explicitly, at others dietary laws and the need to segregate from Gentiles, at another the observation of holidays. When Paul says Law he is sometimes referring to just such ritual laws. Other times he refers more comprehensively to the entire Law, Decalogue and all. Many times it is not obvious which. And since his more explicit discussions are of ritual laws, it would be understandable to take that as his usual reference. But that leads to the unfortunate confusion. Let us sort this out.

There are three questions to be answered concerning the issues raised in Galatians:

1. Do people need to keep the Law to be justified? No.
2. Do people need to keep the ceremonial Law at all? No.
3. Do people need to keep the moral Law on earth? Yes (but see #1, not for justification, but for the sake of the neighbor).

See that there are two freedoms. One is from the ceremonial Law and one from the whole Law, because of justification in Christ. It is unfortunate if these two very different freedoms are confused.

Paul is perhaps responsible for the confusion. For he argues simply that the Law cannot justify—and in fact does not need to because of Christ. With the insight we have from the Lord we see that the ceremonial Law is simply void since His advent, and with the insight from Luther we see that it never obtained for Gentiles in the first place. With the ritual laws out of the

question, it remains to ask whether the moral Law might be necessary for justification. However Paul never parses the difference between the laws. He is arguing with judaizers and their disciples so he simply attacks the main point—not to trust in Law-keeping of any sort—in order to turn the folks from Law to Christ.

But for us the confusion of the two freedoms can create problems. For example, an old medieval misinterpretation said that Christ has freed believers only from OT rites, meaning that to be justified still required keeping the moral Law. Again, an antinomian interpretation would say that just as Christians do not need to obey the ritual Law for any reason at all, so they do not need to obey the moral Law. Again, that Gospel freedom has reduced the Law to only the parts that concern neighbors.

Now we can see how Luther in “Freedom” integrates freedom and love. It is not according to the slogan, free in Christ to serve the neighbor. In Luther’s explanation, as we see in the opening paradox of “Freedom” and in the quotation from his Galatians above, freedom is only in the conscience. It pertains only to heaven, to our standing before God, to whether or not we have righteousness enough to live off of, which in Christ we do. The opposite part of the paradox is not freedom but bondage. “A Christian is perfectly free lord of all, subject to none, and perfectly dutiful servant, subject to all.” Or in his Galatians, “This is the freedom with which Christ has set us free, not from some human slavery or tyrannical authority but from the eternal wrath of God. Where? In the conscience. This is where our freedom comes to a halt; it goes no further.” See, freedom is not for living, but for conscience. For living, Luther says: “At the moment you are busy on earth. Here let the ass work, let him serve and carry the burden that has been laid upon him; that is, let the body and its members be subject to the Law.”

Actually, Luther first discusses the freedom of faith and then Christian living, but even here subjection to the Law for the sake of neighbor is only the second part. In "Freedom" he begins with the distinction in a human between spirit and soul. The spirit is free from the fear of God's wrath because of the justification the believing soul has in Christ. But, Luther says, echoing Paul in Romans 7 and Galatians 5, humans also have sinful flesh, an unruly body which fights and resists the fresh spirit of Christ living in one. "Works reduce the body to subjection and purify it of its evil lusts, and our whole purpose is to be directed only toward the driving out of lusts" (LW 31:359). So, the Christian uses the Law to subject the body to submission. Then, finally, "he lives only for others and not for himself. To this end he brings his body into subjection that he may the more sincerely and freely serve others."

What I think we have seen is this. A view of Christian freedom, or Gospel-based freedom, that teaches that the only Law yet to be obeyed is to help neighbors and not victimize them, is wrong on several counts. First, it misreads Christian freedom from the Law as the nullification of some provisions of the Law. In truth, some provisions, the ritual elements of the Law, are void to Gentiles even without Christ. The moral Law abides in its fullness until heaven and earth pass away. Second, that view reduces the moral Law to helping neighbors and not harming them. But actually the Law also commands many things that do not directly affect neighbors: faith to God and love, worship and prayer, attention to the Word, and lives of holy integrity: self-control, humility, chastity, honesty, peace and joy.

The distinguished pair, Law and Gospel, are the foundation of love and freedom, and *respectively so*. The Gospel gives freedom in the conscience, though not freedom of behavior. The Law binds our bodies to love. Though we may resent the sound of that, Luther points out how in one sense, in our hearts, the freedom

can lead to the love: since Christ has completely lived and died for me, giving me riches beyond what I could ever achieve any other way, why should I not be content with that and now in turn live and die for my neighbor?

That is a future for the church worth hoping for.

Todd Murken

January 21, 2007

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2Tappert, T. G. (2000, c1959). *The book of concord: The confessions of the evangelical Lutheran church* (The Formula of Concord: 2, V, 17). Philadelphia: Fortress Press.

3Luther, M. (1999, c1963). Vol. 26: *Luther's works, vol. 26: Lectures on Galatians, 1535, Chapters 1-4* (J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald & H. T. Lehmann, Ed.). Luther's Works (Ga 2:15). Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House.

[C4_Murken_Future_of_Church \(PDF\)](#)

Honest-to-God Gospel Meets the Dying World

John Strelan

The dying *world*! I have enough to worry about with a dying Australia, let alone a dying world.

Australians have never had much time for the gospel as they heard it from the institutional church. The relationship got off to a bad start with the first European invaders' hatred of the Rev Samuel Marsden, chaplain and magistrate. He was known as 'the flogging parson' (he preached on Sundays and flogged on Mondays). Today the majority of Australians still don't trust the church and its message. Less than 9% of the population attends church regularly.

Divorce from the church and the rejection of organized Christianity doesn't mean, however, an absence of religious interest or spirituality... or 'spiritualities'. Islam as a perceived threat to religious Australia; the resurgence of religion as a moral influence in politics; and attacks on religion by scientists such as Richard Dawkins [*The God Delusion*], have made religion a lively dinner-party topic, with all kinds of Australians admitting to the faith-derived foundations of their personal conduct and life-organisation skills, and coming out as 'believers' of sorts. God-in-Christ is, however, only one of many possible faith objects.

A recent magazine article told the story of Maria. She'd been searching for ways to improve her life. She wanted more money, a better job, a better quality of life. At first she turned to prayer. *I was reading about Tina Turner, about how she used to pray and that, and because I'm a Catholic I have to believe in God.* But after a couple of years Maria felt she needed something more, so she turned to feng shui [the ancient Chinese practice which aims to encourage positive flow in the environment]. One thousand dollars and two years later, after being assured that

wisdom was in her bedroom, fame in her kitchen, money in her laundry, and a career at the front door, Maria found that nothing had changed in her life. These days Maria is back to putting her faith in God, she says. 'As for the rest', the report concluded, 'she's putting that down to a lapse in concentration'. That's about where we are: giving up on God is dismissed with a shrug as 'a lapse in concentration'.

The honest-to-God gospel. Previous speakers have told us clearly what the honest-to-God gospel is and isn't. I won't repeat what they have said. Instead I'll take a step sideways and begin with the rather obvious observation that 'gospel' implies a 'gospeller': *How shall they hear without a preacher?* God addresses the dying world through agents (angels, prophets, apostles, various other human messengers, enemy rulers, terrorists) or means (floods, wars, earthquakes, famines, tsunamis).

Thus when God had something to say to Israel, God sometimes did so through an angel; on at least one occasion God spoke through a donkey (a fact that has been of great comfort to many preachers); but most commonly God spoke through human beings, men and women.

The prophetic literature of the old covenant is replete with the phrase: *The word of the Lord came to...* One example: *The word of the Lord came to Jonah son of Amittai: 'Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it'*. Jonah went off in the very opposite direction. But God threw a storm after him, and after a series of 'throws', Jonah ended up where he started. Then we get one of the most beautiful sentences in the Bible: *The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time*. A second time! God was patient with this petulant prophet. But Jonah did not repent. Iraq repented, from the king to the cattle, Iraq repented...but not Jonah.

Earthen vessels, aren't we. Weak, recalcitrant Jonahs. There is, however, one Gospeller who was without sin but who became an earthen vessel for the sake of a dying world. The Scriptures say of him: *Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days God has spoken to us by the Son...He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being.* The Son. Spitting image of the Father. The Son shows us the heart of God, beating for us... pining for us.

Jesus Christ is both Gospeller and Gospel. As he came from God and was sent by God, so we gossellers have our roots and origin in heaven, and we are sent by the Son to a dying world, living and speaking in the power of Holy Spirit, the Son's promised gift to us.

Inasmuch as this is true of all gossellers, we are all the same. All of us speak of God's great rescue as ones who have themselves been greatly rescued by God. In parts of Eastern Germany there are pulpits known as *Walfischkanzeln*. The preacher enters the pulpit through the body of the fish, and emerges to speak from between the jaws of the fish. That's the place from which all gossellers speak: from between the jaws of the fish.

That we all have in common. But in everything else we are, each of us, different. And here's where we see the great wisdom and the world-embracing love of God. When the life-giving gospel meets the dying world in and through me, it will have a different shape, a different texture, from the gospel which meets the world through you. Its heart and soul is the Lord Jesus Christ crucified and risen, but its clothing comes in part from our life experiences, the way God has chipped away at us to conform us to the image of the Son. So don't knock your experiences, good or otherwise. And don't insist that others must have your set of experiences in order to be effective

gospellers. This individuality is how God makes provision for an ongoing repetition of the Pentecost event: men and women preaching the one message (Christ crucified), but each one speaking a different language so that people may hear, understand, and say: today God's Word struck me as surely as the spear of the hunter finds the heart of the pig.

Notice how the life experiences of God's chosen gospellers shaped the way they spoke the Word. The blinding light of Damascus road gave Paul some of his brightest gospel language. Julian of Norwich (fl. AD 1318) saw the bubonic plague leaving countless children motherless... as she was. She wrote movingly in her *Revelations of Divine Love* of Jesus our Mother: *The human mother will nurse her child with her own milk, but our beloved Mother, Jesus, feeds us with himself, and with the most tender courtesy, does it by means of the blessed Sacrament, the precious food of all true life.* Luther's early experiences of his search for righteousness before God and his subsequent Aha! encounter with Romans 1-3, shaped his reading of how the Word is to be read and confessed before the world.

You can probably give examples of how God intersected the gospel with your lives – each one differently – and how the Holy Spirit equips you, each in your different ways, to intersect the gospel with the lives of those who are dying for life.

More about gospellers later.

II

A dying world. Where do we start when talking about 'the world'? Basically, we can inquire as to how God sees the world, or how the world sees itself. For the latter its best to go to the ad men and women, the artists, film-makers, playwrights, poets, novelists. They have their finger on the pulse. Or just go to

talk-back radio or the Letters to the Editor page: *The country has changed*, wrote one young man. *Forget about good for all; tell me about good for me*. Or here's a young woman, interviewed in a book about the Y generation: *The world is an effed-up place*. Ruth Wajnryb, in her book *Language Most Foul*, claims that the F-word is the most prolific and morphologically flexible swear word in the English language. *The world is an effed-up place*. It figures: the F-word sums up the world as far as the world is concerned. Inelegant... but theologically accurate.

On the other hand, you can probably cite many examples which show that the world actually thinks well of itself. Warren Buffett donates \$42 billion to the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. He is reported to have said: 'There is more than one way to get to heaven, but this is a great way'. Australia's richest man, by the way, 'died' during an operation. Later he reported: 'There's no eternity; no hell; no heaven'. He has since learned that he chose the wrong thing to be wrong about.

The world has its own value system, too. The 10 Commandments are still OK, but they are multiple choice. And consider the 'new morality':

The new morality works like this: if you're not harming anyone, anything you choose to do is fine; and if you are harming someone, that's sad rather than bad...or to put it another way, if your friend leaves his wife and family for another woman, your first responsibility is to take him out for a beer and talk about his turmoil and how unhappy he has been – rather than remind him of all that stuff he said at the altar. Judging is old morality. Empathising is new morality...To get new morality right, you want to be seen to be caring and open-minded...as long as your self-esteem is intact (and that's basically salary-linked), you count yourself a pretty moral sort of person [Shane Watson].

But after all the narcissism and self-indulgence, when the world looks at itself in the mirror at 2.00am, it doesn't like what it sees and it holds out little hope for itself. Therefore, as one warrior said to another in *The Phantom Menace*, 'Concentrate on the moment. Feel. Don't think!' Or as the Nike ad used to say: 'Just do it!'

And yet, and yet... Picador publishers plans to publish four books which will address the USA five years after 9/11. The first novel in the quartet was published late 2006: *The Road*, by Cormac McCarthy. The nuclear buttons have been pressed. The world is silent apart from the intermittent tremble of earthquakes and the crash of falling trees. A man and his son – both nameless, both dying – are travelling across the US. The man wants to reach the coast, where he hopes he might find a group of survivors who will care for his son. In this dying world all human values have fallen away. The one inviolate fact is the bond between father and son. *He held the boy close to him. So thin. My heart, he said. My heart. But he knew that if he were a good father it might well be as his dead wife had said. That the boy was all that stood between him and death.* Such an impossibly slender thread upon which to hang future hopes! But that's what McCarthy does. In the midst of all the unspeakable horrors, the terror and destruction, McCarthy sees hope: the world (he means the USA) will find a way through. Such optimism!

Now, in the context of the task of gospeling to the world, it is important that we are aware of how the world sees itself, what it values, fears, loves, worries about, hopes. That knowledge will, together with our own life-experience and personal formation, influence the particular **shape** of our message. But how the world sees itself is not the ultimate; the ultimate is: how does God see the world?

What is the world according to God? For an answer I could give you a cross-section of Scripture testimony, including Paul's discussion of 'the flesh', or 'the present evil age', but I think the best sustained report on 'the world according to God' is in the Book of Revelation. The world is the great city Babylon, the very attractive whore-city which seduces its citizens to commit every kind of abomination and wickedness, to drink from the cup of evil it offers them continually.

The citizens of Babylon, leaders and led alike, are united in their opposition to God and God's people. They worship and serve the Unholy Trinity: the Dragon and the two Beasts, that is, the political, economic and religious power structures in the world. These mimic the persons of the Holy Trinity, even to the point that the second person of the Unholy Trinity has its throat cut (just like the Lamb-who-was-Slain). So this unholy alliance leads astray multitudes; even Christians are in danger of being deceived, of following the counterfeit instead of the reality, of going after false saviours and ways of salvation that lead nowhere. Dead ends, literally.

The world according to the Unholy Trinity looks to be the real thing, the only reality. It believes its own spin. A White House adviser, when discussing the role of facts in problem-solving, is reported to have remarked: 'That's not the way the world really works anymore. We're an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality'. But such a reality is a lie, one big deception. Its like the set for a spaghetti Western: an impressive façade which if you probe a bit proves to be just that: a façade. And its headed for destruction, says the prophet John (Rev 17:8,11) .

So put on God's glasses and see things as they really are. The ad people, the novelist, the artist, the playwright, the poet, all those people have their finger on the pulse – but their

reading of the world is only a penultimate one. The reading that matters, the one that alone is honest-to-God, is God's view of the world. So I repeat: if we are going to be of any earthly use, the first thing we must do is see the world through God's glasses. A theological reading of the world, if you like. The world according to God.

When we do that on the basis of what God has revealed to us in and thru God's word, we will 'call the thing what it actually is', as Luther insisted theologians of the cross do. We will speak to the world of sin, not just as a moral category but as an ontological one. We will speak of what has happened and what happens to a world in which sin is a fact of life. We'll expose the festering sickness under the 'healthy' exterior. Show the world how it stands *coram Deo*, in the eyes of God. We'll pull no punches.

We will also speak of and to the world of the wages of sin: dying and death and divine judgment. Hmm. In a post-post modern world, passing judgment on anyone is out, and God, if God exists at all, is terminally ill. Death? Avoid the word. Circumlocute. Cosmeticise. Talk about 'passing on' or something. Naming death gives it a reality the world doesn't want to face. Crime-writer Ed McBain spoke for the world when he observed that 'death is not noted for its compassion.'

But being honest-to-God in our speaking to a dying world, we call the thing what it really is. There's no human resource which can rescue a dying world from its inevitable death and destruction, from the judgment of God. No human resource: nothing within the dying world can save it. That's offensive. That just drives the dying world into further anger and rebellion against God. Sin becomes more sinful and the judgment more inevitable, as it were.

And so we come to the bottom line, the primal and seminal sin: the world's refusal to trust God and God's rescue plan for the world. Unfaith. Unbelief. Curved in on itself and away from God, the dying world has exchanged the truth of God for a lie, the true God for gods of its own making. As a result, the world is without God and without hope. Hope-less.

III

We honest-to-God gossellers have something to say to this hopeless, dying world, don't we? Before I expand on that, I have to tell you that I am uncomfortable talking all the time about 'the world'. In the context of gosselling, what do we mean, specifically, when we say 'the world'? The great unwashed of China... India... Indonesia? The Islamic world? The new rich in Russia? The poor and oppressed ethnic groups in Australia and the Americas and Europe? The world of your apartment block, your school or office or local neighbourhood? If we are going to be honest-to-God about gosselling a dying 'world', we have to clarify which 'world' we are called to address.

Consider this: in the Book of Acts, Jesus commissions the apostles to be 'my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth'. The 'world'. And then Luke recounts key gosselling incidents, illustrating the fulfilment of the commission: Philip and Simon in Samaria; Philip and the eunuch from Ethiopia; Ananias and Saul from Tarsus; Peter and Cornelius of the Italian Cohort; Paul and the jailor at Philippi; Priscilla and Apollos – in short, not the masses, but individuals. But, you ask, what about Pentecost? Well, a careful reading of that account suggests that Peter's 'sermon' should be taken as illustrative of what all the apostles said that day: Peter 'stood up together with the eleven'. So perhaps those 3000 who were baptised that day had been addressed by God's law-and-

gospel word in their first or second language, one they understood. It was not a general word, but a personal, particular word that brought life to those dying hearers.

Consider, furthermore, the nature of the honest-to-God gospel itself. In his grand theological testament, written when he believed he was facing imminent death, Martin Luther speaks of the gospel, 'which gives more than one kind of counsel and help against sin, because God is overwhelmingly rich in his grace'. First is the spoken word, specifically the word concerning forgiveness of sins; 2nd, Baptism; 3rd the Sacrament of the Altar; 4th Absolution; and 5th 'the mutual conversation and consolation of the brothers and sisters'. Notice that after the spoken word, which is general and 'preached to the whole world' as Luther says, everything else is particular and personal: baptism, Lord's Supper, absolution, mutual consolation. Absolution, by the way, used to be personal and particular, in my church at least (we had communal confession of sins, then we came to the altar: *Come then to the altar, and kneeling receive the holy Absolution*. My first pastor was my father. Still today, when I hear the absolution pronounced, I can feel my father's hand on my head). Thus, in various ways, God makes provision to ensure that we don't gospel everyone in general and no-one in particular.

In the next few minutes, when I say 'world' let's not exclude the global dimension, but let's think especially of individual people or small groups in our micro-cosmos who are dying for lack of the Light and the Bread and the Water of Life. God has placed them in our path. How do we gospel them?

But quickly, first, an easier question: *what* do we speak to them? We can't go wrong if we do what St Mark tells us our Lord did: he heralded the 'gospel of God', saying that now is God's special, saving time; the kingdom of God is here (in his

person); people should repent and believe in the gospel. The good news is that God is savingly at work in the world in the person of God's Son. The proper response is to repent and believe.

So far so good. An answer straight out of the seminary textbook. Still the question nags: *How* do we 'herald the gospel of God', speak God's word for people to people?

Well, before we speak to them we listen to them: befriend them, draw near to them (as Jesus did with 'publicans and sinners'), practise hospitality (not the hospitality-industry model where people go in strangers and leave strangers), but actually get our hands wet as we dry their tears, and *listen* to them.

Honest-to-God gospel-listening is called for: listening with sensitivity, love, compassion, hearing their cries, eager to know them and learn their language. Sacrificial listening, if you like, where we put ourselves and our agendas second to the person God has placed before us. You won't know in what language to couch the word of life if you don't know the language of the person who is dying. The spear will miss the mark. There's a line in the movie *As Good as it Gets* which haunts me as a gosseller: Jack Nicholson's character is obsessive/compulsive. He's frustrated because people don't listen for the compassionate heart beating inside the socially inept, even horrid, exterior.

At a critical point he cries out: 'I'm drowning here, and you're describing the water'. I fear, fear greatly that all too often I'm guilty of describing the water. That happens when I don't listen. 'Describing the water...'

Listening to reach the heart. One of the saddest stories I heard in Papua New Guinea was of a young missionary who tried to elicit language data from the people in an academic and

impersonal way. He interrogated his informants, wrote it all down, retired to his hut at night to write-up his findings. ..but showed little interest in developing a personal relationship with the people. He heard but did not listen. The people did not like him, so they invented a language for him, and taught it to him bit by bit! Why did you do that? *We didn't want him to get into our hearts*, they said. I guess it was some sort of blessing that he contracted a tropical disease and had to return to his home country before he found out what the people were doing.

Listen so that you may speak to the heart. What language? How do we tell of the urgent presence of the Kingdom of God in the present, in people's lives, tell it in such a way that they will repent and believe the gospel? It is perhaps worth noting – in trying to answer those questions – that after the programmatic sentence in Mark 1:14,15 (to which I alluded above), there is no account in the rest of Mark's gospel of Jesus using repent- and-believe language.

Does that mean that throughout his earthly ministry Jesus did not in fact preach 'the good news of the Kingdom' and call people 'to repent and believe'? No. He did, but not as we might expect him to do it. Mark tells a number of stories about Jesus healing 'many that were sick of divers diseases'[KJV] (as a child that phrase puzzled me: did divers have particular diseases?), including lepers, the blind, the crippled and a woman with a 12- year haemorrhage. Mark tells of Jesus enjoying table fellowship with 'tax collectors and sinners'.

Common to these stories is the theme of clean/unclean – something which would have been on the minds of Mark's presumably gentile readers. Unclean people – lepers, sick, a menstruating woman, the blind, the lame, and Gentiles, were regarded as being 'outside'. They were excluded from temple and

synagogue. They needed to meet Jesus, the Kingdom bringer, who crosses the boundaries and brings the outsiders in, makes them insiders. 'Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I have come to call not the righteous but sinners', Jesus said in explanation of his action in eating and drinking with outsiders (Mark 2:17).

All of Jesus' boundary-crossing activities were announcements of the good news of the Kingdom, announcing that the Kingdom of God is here, now. Those who accepted the Lord's gracious invitation to a meal, who came to him for healing, who saw in him the place of God's presence, who were cleansed by him, who were restored to life – these received the good news of the Kingdom. In classical terms, they repented and believed: they changed, or better, they were changed; they came in from the cold into the warmth of fellowship with Christ. They became new people: outsiders became insiders; sick became healthy; unclean became clean.

We might also note how Mark presents Jesus as Lord of the powers which seek to dominate human existence: Beelzebub and the demonic powers, the sea 'gone wrong', sin, the law, the 'leaven of the Pharisees and of Herod', the traditions of the elders, unjust civil and ecclesial authorities, and death itself. These have all had their teeth removed. This was Mark's good news to his readers, just as it is good news to your friends and neighbours and colleagues who are enslaved or exploited by the anti-God powers of 2007.

Could or should we speak the 'gospel of the Kingdom' using the kind of language and Jesus stories that Mark did? Just because Mark did it does not mean we have to. But it makes a lot of sense to me today. Take, for example the idea of clean/unclean or inside/outside. The people who do TV ads in Australia play on the fact that people want to be clean (clean kitchen floor,

clean bathroom, clean hair, clean body, clean clothes and so forth). They touch a neuralgic point. They know that there's a chronic sense of uncleanness among many Australians. The various kinds of abuse and hurts, the pain and wounds which men, women and children endure, paedophilia, including corporate paedophilia, rape, home invasion, broken families, and, and ...the list is long – people feel violated, dirty, deserted, insecure, rejected and neglected by God and humans: 'unclean' and 'outside', marginalised. Such people need to hear the story of the Clean One who became the Unclean One for them and took all their rubbish with him to the cross. They need to be introduced to the Ultimate Insider who went outside, and crossed all the boundaries to stand beside the Outsiders and bring them home. A message like that would be for such people 'the good news of the Kingdom'.

The point I'm trying to make is that we are not locked into just one way of gospeling – we are free to find the particular way which 'fits' the person or persons or situation we are addressing. Mark's gospel shows us that we don't have to use the word 'gospel' or 'Kingdom of God' or 'believe' or 'repent' to speak the good news to someone. The language and imagery and metaphors you use should be determined by the situation of the person with whom you are interfacing. Usually the 'language of Zion' is to them a foreign language.

Many years ago, in Papua New Guinea, my fellow-missionaries and I faced the challenge of speaking the gospel to a people who had no written language. They were deeply religious, which made our task harder, since they heard all that we said through their own complex religious matrix (which we didn't grasp quickly or well). We made many mistakes, and we were often misunderstood. But it was a necessary exercise, and good for us. We couldn't bluff our way through. We had to unpack our Christian faith, identify what was the essence and what was the cultural baggage,

consider the religious language we used to express it, and repackage it all in such a way that it would be God's living Word addressed to people in their own language. We prayed that when the people heard it, they would say: Today God spoke to me in my own language in my own place in my own time.

Every gospeller has had to go, and must still go, through that same process. One of the great things about Crossings is that practitioners get to learn and practice just how to do the transition from biblical/theological/dogmatic language and imagery to the language of today's situations. It's a great preparation for mission.

The gospel is actually simple and straightforward, even though it deals with the deepest mysteries. The complexity lies in the human situation today. There's no way that 'one size fits all' when it comes to speaking the gospel into each person's unique situation and sets of experiences. It requires wisdom and compassion, thoughtful effort and patience on our part...and, don't forget, listening!

Can we do it? No. But God can and does... through the word we speak, halting and ill-fitting though it may be. For the word we speak is what St Peter calls an 'imperishable seed'; it's the 'living and abiding word'. Its 'the gospel which was preached to us', says Peter. This seed was implanted in us at our baptism; each day it comes to life in us and gives us new life. God gives us that new life for the sake of the neighbour, so that we may serve the neighbour by being God's instruments for implanting in them the imperishable seed of the gospel.

John G Strelan
Slacks Creek, Queensland
January 15 2007

[K3_Strelan_Dying_World \(PDF\)](#)

WHAT IS THE CHURCH FOR?

Marcus Lohrmann

The assigned topic is wonderfully ambiguous, is it not? One could ask, Are we clear about the subject? Are we speaking of the church catholic? Are we asking the question of that part of the church catholic called the Lutheran church? Or, are we asking the question concerning that part of the Lutheran church called the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America? Or, are we asking the question concerning the local manifestation of the church called the congregation?

To add a bit more ambiguity to the topic, it ends with a preposition which may point in several directions. Are we asking, What is the church **for** as opposed to what is it **against**? In other words, are we asking, For what is the church an advocate? Or, the question may be understood as asking about the ultimate purpose of the church.

The modest goal of this paper will be to speak in a manner in which has implications for all of the above. Obviously, this will not be an exhaustive treatment of the subject. I hope that it will stimulate some fresh thinking that God might use to impact our service in Christ's church for the sake of the world in this time and place.

I will seek to address the subject in a manner which reflects an appreciation for the current context of the church (in all its ambiguity!) and which draws from Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions, resources which ought to shape the response from

one who seeks to bear the best of “the tradition.” I will speak as one who was nurtured in the educational system of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, shaped by the debates which led to the formation of Christ Seminary-Seminex and the creation of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, and who has served as a parish pastor for over twenty years and a bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America for over eight years. Finally, I bring to this presentation a painful awareness of the “fallenness” of the church and the conviction that it is still “the bride of Christ.”

I. Why the Topic?

I cannot read the minds of those who put together this conference. But I can speculate on the attractiveness of the topic within the context of a conference which is addressing the continued usefulness of the Law/Gospel distinction for shaping the church’s life and witness.

Most of the participants of this conference live and work in a context of the church catholic that is increasingly referred to as moving to the “sideline” as opposed to the “mainline.” In a recent year the losses in membership from ELCA congregations are the equivalent of what could be a synod in this church. In light of the fact that the ELCA is made up of 65 synods, that speaks to significant losses. Those figures certainly reflect the reality of the Northwestern Ohio Synod in which I served. Annual reports reflect an aging and declining church body. My understanding is that membership patterns in the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod are not all that different. Figures also indicate that the Lutheran church in the United States is failing to reflect the increasingly diverse population of this country. Rather, we still largely reflect a heritage which was shaped by a European immigrant population of previous

generations.

Within the cultural context, what seems to count is that people feel their religion and believe that what they are doing is making a difference. The matter of the personality of the pastor and the pastor's overall winsomeness is regarded as being increasingly important to growing congregations. For aging congregations in decline it becomes tempting to hope that "just the right pastor will turn us around" or to fall prey to the latest church marketing strategy which offers such promise. Our culture is not one which has a predisposition to honoring institutions. People increasingly view with suspicion anything that cannot be seen beyond the immediate horizon. This suspicion is reflected in the observation that while overall congregational giving appears to be consistent or growing, mission support for denominational ministries are in a long term pattern of reduction. In a culture where people are not automatically "big" on maintaining institutional structure, the preference is for that which is spiritual, purposeful, and immediate.

People of our congregations often look with a measure of envy upon largely non- denominational and evangelical congregations which appear to be more effective at connecting with the culture. Pastors and leaders reason that "what we are doing is not working so we need to look at what the congregations that are growing are doing and follow that pattern." "Praise bands" multiply, much of Scripture gets jettisoned, and theology generally appears to be less and less important. In many of these contexts, baptism and the Lord's Supper are de-emphasized. Recently, one pastor commented, "These are not good days to be regarded as a theologian." What is important is what works.

If one approach is to grab on to whatever seems to be working in a consumer driven church marketplace, then another equally and

perhaps more common approach is to “batten down the hatches”, grieve the loss of the “good ole days,” maintain the particular tradition of a given context and fight to keep the doors of the church open until the last member is buried. Such congregations often are grim places, vulnerable to fights about personality and what constitutes faithfulness to the (local) tradition. In these contexts there is often little sense that the church is called to be in ministry for the sake of the world. The overarching concern is to maintain the ever-dwindling club.

We face no small challenges in the present context. The temptations are several. One would argue, “We need to do what works, what connects with the culture, if we are to continue to exist.” Another may respond, “If we do that, we sell out our Lutheran heritage. We need to maintain our traditions and, if necessary, simply do the best we can” (one might add, “...grimly trudging on”).

For those who believe that God is not quite finished with our denominations and related structures and institutions, the temptation is to do whatever is necessary to maintain them. The reality is that the denomination and its related structures and institution will be healthy to the degree that the congregations reflect health and vitality (terms that, in themselves need to be defined). Whether we speak of the local congregation, mid-level judicatories (e.g. synods or districts, or denominational structures, the risk is that we make them ends in themselves. The biblical word for that is idolatry. And, we know, God is not pleased with idols-even when they go under the name of “church”!

So, the question, in all its ambiguity, is important. What is the church for?

II. A Brief Biblical Survey Related to the Church and its Purpose

The bulk of what follows will draw from New Testament writings. However, one can make a strong argument from the Hebrew writings which do speak to the purpose of the people of God and from which the New Testament writers frequently will draw. The people of God are those whom God has reached in mercy, who respond by trusting in God's promise, and who are called to extend that promise to others. Classic texts involve the promise given to Abraham (Genesis 12), the Exodus Story and the resulting call to the obedience of faith, and the call of David (II Samuel 7). Yet the track record illustrates the inclination for the people of God to use God's promise for one's own advantage, the ease with which trust in God's promise gets subverted by one's vulnerability to the surrounding culture (check out the prophets), and the resulting experience of the judgment of God.

The story continues, with God's faithfulness to God's promises which offers the hope to which Mary, and Zechariah refer in their songs of praise (Luke 1). In his life, death and resurrection, Jesus embodies the vocation of the people of God. Peter's witness (Acts 2) and that of Stephen (Acts 7) are just two examples which illustrate God's faithfulness to God's promise in the story of the crucified and risen Christ, whose benefits, chiefly, forgiveness of sins, are offered to the hearer, with the resulting implications that the story will be shared "to all nations" (Luke 24:47)

To put it succinctly, the New Testament witness speaks to the church and its purpose of linking it to the telling and embodying of the "Jesus story". Typically when we speak of the church we think most readily of the institution of which we are a part. Yet within the New Testament, the church is most often

spoken of with respect to what is taking place within the assembly. The first purpose of the church is to know and experience the gracious visitation of God in Jesus Christ. For example, in conversation related to what is taking place "where two or three are gathered in my name," Jesus promises, "I am there among them." (Matthew 18:20) What is the purpose of such a gathering? Most immediately, in that text, it has to do with "binding and loosing"-which surely points to the central role of forgiveness. The fuller context suggests that it also has to do with "attending to the little ones" (children or those "little in faith" or both?).

In Matthew 28, the God-authorized crucified and risen Lord grants the gathered disciples (both worshipping and doubting!) his authorizing word, "...to make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you." Best of all, with that authorizing word comes the promise, "I am with you always, to the end of the age." (Matthew 28:16-20)

Yet that purpose is not limited to the telling of the story of Jesus and that which he wills for his own. Jesus' earlier words indicate those who know his presence will also discern and embody his presence even as he meets them "in the least of these." In fact, failure to attend to the hungry, the imprisoned, etc., makes one vulnerable to being removed from his presence. That his disciples bailed out on Jesus in his (and their!) moment of crisis when he was numbered "among the least" and that Jesus yet reclaims them as his own is good news, particularly in the face of the church's frequent failure to attend "to the least."

In both Luke and John, the crucified and risen Lord embraces the community, the gathered assembly, which has failed him. Though

forewarned, their response to Jesus had been betrayal. So, for good reasons, they “were startled and terrified and thought they were seeing a ghost.” (Luke 24:37) They may have considered that to be the best of possibilities in view of their denial! But Jesus greets them with peace, displays the marks of his crucifixion, feeds them, and then declares in words that speak volumes about the church’s purpose:

Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things.

Such witnesses will not be without resources. In reference to the coming Holy Spirit, Jesus continues, “See, I am sending you what my Father promised.” (Luke 24:44-49)

In Acts, Luke will record the story of the *empowered community* taking Jesus at his word and then *embodying that word* in their life together. It is a community in which members tell the story and then celebrate that story in their life together. (e.g. Acts 2; 4:32-34 et.al.) This community is characterized by “wonders and signs”, generosity, the praise of God, and “having the good will of all the people.” It will be a community that needs to learn about the new things that God is going in Christ Jesus through the Holy Spirit. The early community will be astonished that the good news is extended and received by such folk as a former persecutor of the church (Acts 9), an Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8,) and the Gentiles (Acts 10). In the face of conflict it will need to discern what God is doing and chart the course of its life and mission, confident in the leadership of the Holy Spirit (Acts 15).

From the very beginning, the character of the church has been far from untarnished. In such moments it is at risk of betraying

its purpose. Paul offers a refresher course to the church in Corinth that is in danger of losing sight of both its identity and its purpose:

“So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation; everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us.”

Consequently, Paul implores his readers in words that are most familiar to those who are a part of the Crossings Community, “...be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” (II Corinthians 5:17-21) The renewed conversion of the participants within the church will be a requirement for a church that is clear with respect to what God would do through it.

One can deduce from the text that the purpose of the church is to create the space for the gathered to hear the story of God’s action on their behalf in Christ and for that word, by the power of the Holy Spirit, to be appropriated, embodied (see I Corinthians 12), and shared.

The writer to the Hebrews speaks to a community that is at risk on account of various afflictions:

Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful. And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but

encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

Such a word of encouragement comes out of the previous affirmation:

Therefore, my friends, since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain (that is, through his flesh), and since we have a great high priest over the house of God, let us approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. (Hebrews 10:19-22)

Many other texts could be cited which relate to the identity and purpose of the church. But in these texts some things become very clear. First, the church is called together and into existence by the Word of God in Christ Jesus, empowered by the Holy Spirit. Second, within the gathering, the Word is shared and celebrated within the context also of baptism and the Lord's Supper for the sake of mutual encouragement in faith. Third, the purpose of the gathering is to be formed into the Body of Christ for the sake of the world. The gathered community is never an end in itself. The ministry of the church is finally bent towards the world. Fourth, until the Day of our Lord, the church is flawed. In Christ, God is always about the work of new creation.

On the face of it, there is little that should be new to those gathered in this place. But what is offered is central to the church's identity and purpose. It cannot be taken for granted less the church forfeit its character as the church of Christ. In words that draw from the Hebrew Scriptures, a final quote from I Peter serves to underscore that which is at the heart of

the church's identity and its purpose:

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own People, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.

In the midst of all that the church faces in these days, these texts suggest critical questions: How well are we attending to the telling of the story of the God who in the crucified and risen Christ and by the empowering Spirit would still draw us to God and to one another? To what degree do our gathered communities and the church catholic need to re-appropriate this story? What are the implications of this story for the lives of the baptized as they live out their vocations within the church and the world?

III. WHAT IS THE CHURCH FOR?

A. SOME INPUT FROM LUTHER

For the sake of the conversation, one could do worse than to quote Luther's comments from the Large Catechism in their entirety. While resisting that impulse, I will quote liberally. The quotes come from **The Book of Concord** (Augsburg Fortress, 2000) edited by Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert. For the purpose of this paper I will simply indicate the page of the quote.

Luther writes: "To this article... I cannot give a better title than 'Being Made Holy.' In it are expressed and portrayed the Holy Spirit and his office, which is that he makes us holy." Luther asks, "How does such sanctifying take place?" He goes on to answer the question:

Just as the Son obtains dominion by purchasing us through his

birth, death,
and resurrection, etc. so the holy Spirit effects our being
made holy through the following, the community of saints or
Christian church, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of
the body and the life everlasting. (p. 435)

In a remarkable sentence Luther adds, "That is, he (the Holy Spirit, ed.) first leads us into his holy communion, placing us in the church's lap, where he preaches to us and brings us to Christ." How is that for a concise statement about the church's purpose?

Luther continues:

Neither you nor I could ever know anything about Christ or believe in him and receive him as Lord, unless these were offered to us and bestowed upon our hearts through the preaching of the gospel by the Holy Spirit. The work is finished and completed; Christ has acquired and won the treasure for us by his sufferings, death and resurrection, etc. But if the work remained hidden so that no one knew of it, it would have all been in vain, all lost. (p. 436)

Luther speaks of the church as he addresses "the ways and means" through which the Holy Spirit works:

...he has a unique community in the world, which is the mother that begets and bears every Christian through the Word of God, which the Holy Spirit reveals and proclaims, through which he illuminates and inflames hearts so that they grasp and accept it, cling to it, and persevere in it. (p. 436)

What is at the heart of Word of God? One cannot read Luther without catching the substance of that Word. It has everything to do with Christ. "For where Christ is not preached, there is no Holy Spirit to create, call, and gather the Christian church, apart from which no one can come to the Lord Jesus Christ."

(p.436) The church is both the community that is called into existence through the preaching of Christ and the community which offers that Word which "begets and bears every Christian." Such "begetting and bearing" happens "...through the Holy Sacraments as well as through the comforting words of the entire gospel." Luther explains, "This encompasses everything that is to be preached about the sacraments and, in short, the entire gospel and all the official responsibilities of the Christian community." (p. 438) One might speculate about those things in which the church may "minor" but there is no question about that in which it must "major." The work of the Holy Spirit through the church is ongoing: "...for this purpose he (the Holy Spirit) has appointed a community on earth, through which he speaks and does all his work. For he has not yet gathered together all this community, nor has he completed the granting of forgiveness." (p. 439)

Luther's words suggest that a litmus test for the presence of the church is, "Is Christ preached?" If the answer is "No", despite the name on the door one might well question if the church is, in fact, present. Similarly, such a gathering will have also forgotten its purpose.

B. SOME INPUT FROM THE AUGSBURG CONFESSION AND THE APOLOGY OF THE AUGSBURG CONFESSION

Certainly one of the major issues the reformers had to address was the matter of the nature of the church. In the Augsburg Confession, the Articles which relate to the church are not broached until the matter of justification has been raised (and then greatly expanded in the Apology in response to the Confutators' critique). It is interesting to note that Article V is titled "Concerning the Office of Preaching" in the Latin translation and "Concerning Ministry in the Church" in the

German translation. Echoing Luther's perspective in the Large Catechism, Melanchthon's words will indicate that it is the gospel that calls forth the response of faith and which brings the church into being:

So that we may obtain this faith, the ministry of teaching the gospel and administering the sacraments was instituted. For through the Word and the sacraments as through instruments the Holy Spirit is given, who effects faith where and when it pleases God, not on account of our own merits but on account of Christ, justifies those who believe that they are received into grace on account of Christ. (p. 41)

Such faith "...is bound to yield good fruits... and good works commanded by God on account of God's will and not so that we may trust in these works to merit justification before God." (Article VI, p.41)

The description of the church follows in Article VII. We have memorized it:

The church is the assembly of saints in which the gospel is purely taught and the sacraments are administered rightly. And, it is enough for the true unity of the church to agree concerning the teaching of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments."

The previous Articles make it patently clear that honoring and making use of Christ is that which is central to the "teaching of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments." In making the case for keeping central that which needs to be central and demonstrating flexibility in other matters, Melanchthon continues, "...it is not necessary that human traditions, rites, or ceremonies instituted by human beings be alike everywhere." (Article VII, p. 43)

In his response to the Confutators, Melanchthon writes in a manner which shapes how Lutheran Christians understand the church:

...although hypocrites and wicked people are indeed associated with the true church according to external rites, nevertheless when the church is defined, it must be defined as that which is the living body of Christ and as that which is the church in fact as well as in name. (p. 175)

He explains,

If we define the church only in terms of an external government consisting of both the good and the wicked people, people will not understand that the kingdom of Christ is the righteousness of the heart and the gift of the Holy Spirit. Instead they will think that it is only the external observance of certain religious rites and rituals. (p. 175)

It is clear that Melanchthon desires his auditors consistently to think first of the church as that which is constituted by Word and Sacrament through the power of the Holy Spirit. It is that which is the Body of Christ and which initiates one into the kingdom of Christ. To those who charge that the Reformers are "...dreaming about some platonic republic," Melanchthon responds, "...this church truly exists, consisting of true believing people scattered throughout the world. And we add its marks: the pure teaching of the gospel and the sacraments." For the sake of those of us who have added more than our share of "stubble", he graciously adds:

Even though there are among these people many weak ones who build upon the foundation structures of stubble that will perish (that is to say, certain useless opinions), nevertheless because they do not overthrow the foundation, these things are to be both forgiven and correction. (p. 177)

By and large, it seems clear that when the people of that period spoke of the church they had in mind the church that was identified with Rome under the leadership of the papacy. How could it be otherwise? The stinging critique of that church by Luther and Melancthon led to the accusation that the reformers were guilty of schism. In Article XIV of the Apology, Melancthon responds:

Thus the cruelty of the bishops is the reason for abolition of the canonical order in some places despite our earnest desire to retain it. Let the bishops ask themselves how they will give an answer to God for breaking up the church. (p. 222)

Melancthon does not deny the church's need to maintain certain traditions and rites. However, he is insistent that they not obscure "...the work of Christ and the righteousness of faith." He cites the holy Fathers who "...did not institute a single tradition for the purpose of maintaining the forgiveness of sins or righteousness; they instituted them for the sake of good order in the church and for the sake of tranquility (Apology, Article XV, p. 224)

IV. WHAT IS THE CHURCH FOR? SOME IMPLICATIONS FROM THIS SCRIPTURAL AND CONFESSIONAL SURVEY

1. At the heart of the gospel is the story of what God has done through the birth, life, death, resurrection of our Lord Jesus through whom, by the power of the Holy Spirit, we have forgiveness of sins, life and salvation. The story invites repentance, faith, and renewal of life in the hearers.

2. The church, the Body of Christ, the kingdom of Christ, is called into existence by the power of the Holy Spirit as the

Word of God in Christ is proclaimed, taught and shared and sins are forgiven in Christ's name. Baptism and the Lord's Supper, "rightly delivered" give the benefits of Christ to those who receive those benefits in faith. To be "in Christ" is to be gathered into Christ's church that exists throughout time and space. You cannot have one without the other. The church is not "ours". It belongs to Christ.

3. The church's chief calling, from which all its work ought to proceed, is to proclaim what God has done for us and for the world in Christ. Within the church, in all its expressions, priority needs to be given to the preaching of Christ as that which is central to both the identity and the purpose of the church. The church is for the gospel!

4. Rites and traditions, including those of denominational structures, need to serve the gospel as a matter of priority lest they become "stubble" to be forgiven and corrected at best or vulnerable to the judgment of God at worse.

5. An ongoing task of all the baptized, including church leadership, is to insure that the gospel is being proclaimed, taught, and, by the power of the Holy Spirit, embodied in each gathered community and in the lives of each of the baptized.

6. The church is God's mission in Christ to the church. But it is also God's mission to the world, sent to embody Christ to and to recognize Christ in "the least of these". The church is *for* the other. The failure of the church to "own" this calling, signals the need to hear the gospel afresh, lest we be numbered among the "wicked and the evil" who fail to recognize Christ in our midst.

V. GIVEN THESE IMPLICATIONS, SOME OBSERVATIONS AND QUESTIONS

1. Given the centrality of the gospel in Lutheran Christian theology, within this tradition why is there such timidity among the baptized (including many lay and rostered leadership) in speaking it and in sharing it? How might the Holy Spirit still use us (*all* the baptized people of God) and release our tongues and use our lives to tell the story of what God has done for us and for this world?

2. Lutheran confessional theology posits a profound understanding of the church which locates it where the gospel is preached and the sacraments rightly administered. Such a definition also signals our deep unity with the church catholic, namely, those who have been gathered into Christ across space and time. Why is it that many congregations have little sense of what it means to be linked with others who confess Christ beyond the local community?

3. The church is the community created by the Holy Spirit that is made up of those who are hearing and experiencing what it means to be justified by God's grace through faith in Jesus Christ. The Lutheran confessors do not fully realize the scope of that debate until they receive the critique of the Confutators. They then explode this notion in the Apology, Articles IV and V, and speak about the inevitability of good works in the lives of those who hear the gospel. Have we fully mined this theology in helping the baptized to use the gospel "to bear God's creative and redeeming word to all the world?"

4. "Where two or three are gathered in my name," says Jesus, "there am I in the midst of them." Where two or three are gathered there is also an institution that will always have an

inclination to idolatry. At great risk the reformers raised questions that relate to the heart of the gospel and the life of the church? What are those questions which we need to ask of ourselves, of each other, and our “rites and traditions”, for the sake of the gospel. What needs to die (or be put to death) in us and in the church in order that the life of Christ might be more clearly manifest in our lives and in Christ’s church (feel free to check out my article, “Is the Church Dying” which can be found on our synod website or in the Crossings published Schroeder Festschrift, **Gospel Blazes in the Dark**).

5. Sadly, many non-Christians have experienced the Christian church as being judgmental, hypocritical, materialistic, and indifferent to the needs of others. Lutherans are not exempt from such criticism. Is there validity to this critique? Might this word be God’s judgment that invites our repentance and renewed life in the Spirit? What might that look like?

6. Having heard the gospel, as we speak to the matter of good works and the fruit of faith, how might the church (as the individual baptized people of God and as institution) speak to matters related to the “care of creation,” where the stakes are increasingly high?

7. Acknowledging the increasingly global and pluralistic context in which we live, how might we better attend to “the other” and yet give voice to the hope that we have in Christ?

VI. ONE MODEL THAT SEEKS TO BE PURPOSEFUL

Part I “Why the Topic?” introduced some of the challenges that face the church in its various manifestations. Participants in this seminar surely could add others. The scriptural and

confessional survey sought to identify some of the “basics” that relate to the church’s identity and purpose if it is to be the church of Christ. The previous section seeks to raise questions as we get at the work of living out our calling to be the church of Christ in this time and place.

Here it is tempting to establish a template for what the church ought to look like in all its various manifestations. The “basics” are clear. The specifics are not nearly so. The challenge for every manifestation of the church in every place and time is for the baptized people of God and its lay and pastoral leadership to be the church in a way that addresses the specific context and which draws upon the resources God has given us in our Lord Jesus Christ. As it does so, it does that within the context of the whole of Christ’s church which gets to “weigh in” with respect to what is happening in the local context and vice versa.

The context within which I serve is the Northwestern Ohio Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Like every judicatory the issues we face are numerous. They have local, state, national, international, and ecumenical dimensions-to name only a few. In my early years in the office of bishop, synodical leadership, the staff and I frequently found ourselves asking, What is it that gives shape to our work together? In the context of this presentation the question could be asked, What does it mean for the synod to be church and to give direction to those congregations, ministries and agencies with whom we are related? What is our purpose? Such questions and much hard work and prayer led to the development of the following Mission Statement and Guiding Principles:

Marked with the cross of Christ forever, we who belong to the

congregations, agencies and ministries of the Northwestern Ohio Synod, will witness together to God's creative and redeeming Word to all the world.

Northwestern Ohio Synod Guiding Principles (Core Values):

1. Christ Jesus is Lord. Christ crucified and risen for all remains at the center of who we are and what we do.
2. The cross is at the heart of the Lutheran understanding of the Gospel and will be the center of our life and work together as a synod. It is in the cross of Christ that we know God's grace and understand the Trinity. The cross is at the heart of word and sacrament. The Lutheran Church is a 'cross shaped' church.
3. All those who are baptized into Christ have a part in God's mission to the world.
4. Mission requires effective, faithful and Christ-centered clergy and lay leadership.
5. Blessed by the Holy Spirit, God has given us the gifts we need to be the Church in mission.
Equipped and empowered disciples live out God's mission in daily life. Blessed by the Holy Spirit, we have what we need to be a church in mission.
6. We best embody Christ when we work together.

The Mission Statement and Guiding Principles are posted in our Conference Meeting Room in the Synod office and frequently referenced. They have been formative in shaping decisions and the direction for our life together in the synod. Several

examples may serve to illustrate this. We asked ourselves, How do we lift up the centrality of what it means to be “Marked with the cross of Christ forever” and the Guiding Principles? We made the decision to invite six to ten rostered leaders in for a monthly Eucharist. One of the pastors is asked to preach and preside for a service which includes all the synod staff. Following the worship service, the support staff is excused and we continue conversation with respect to the sermon and the text, how it connects with the participants, where the gospel was heard and so forth. Conversation continues related to how we develop sermons, “necessitate Christ”, and seek to connect law/gospel with the lives of those who gather in worship. Participants have found these conversations most edifying.

Most recently a Task Force has been doing hard work related to developing an Ethnic Mission Strategy. As the Task Force examined the realities of life in the Northwestern Ohio Synod and our failure to connect with ethnic minorities (and many others!) it utilized the Mission Strategy and Guiding Principles to shape the recommendations which will be considered and, I pray, “owned” by the Synod Assembly which meets in May. If you are interested in checking out the report, visit the synod website: www.nwos-elca.org. Of course, the challenge will be to move beyond a report to implementation!

Thus far we have found the Mission Statement and the Guiding Principles to be most helpful in shaping our leadership and life together in the synod. Our hope and prayer is that Mission Statement and Guiding Principles faithfully reflect our identity and purpose as those who are called to be the church of Christ in this place and time.

VII. JESUS CHRIST IS LORD

After a particularly difficult day in the world and in the synod office, I found myself most discouraged and feeling quite hopeless. At that moment, Pastor Ray Gottschling, one of the Assistants to the Bishop, walked into my office. I could not help myself. I asked, "Ray, do you have much hope for the world and for the church." Without a moment's hesitation, Ray responded with a grin, "If Jesus is Lord I do! A grim moment yielded to laughter and renewed hope.

The church in all its manifestations is facing many challenges. It has never been otherwise. The issues facing our nation and world are daunting. The stakes have never been higher. In view of those realities, our consolation and hope is that Jesus is Lord. Because we have been "marked with the cross of Christ forever", this study has shown that both our identity and our purpose are quite clear. The invitation is to trust Christ's promises and, guided by the Holy Spirit, work out the specifics for the time and places in which God has called us to serve.

Submitted by:

Marcus C. Lohrmann

January 12, 2007

[C2_Lohmann_Church_For \(PDF\)](#)

Walt Reiner R.I.P.

Colleagues,

One of my dearest buddies during my years in the theology department at Valparaiso (Indiana) University, 1957-71, was Walt Reiner. Walt was *sui generis*, he fit no existing categories. To some extent, of course, that is true of every human being. Unique. No carbon copy anywhere. But with Walt it was even more so. Because students in the programs he directed at the University were required to have majors in theology, Walt was "sort of" a member of the theology department. Thus for many years we were constantly together, and for a few years as department chairman I was "sort of" his boss. But Walt's academic degree was in football! However, he read everything across the arts and sciences spectrum, and on his own became a fan of French Reformed (sic!) theologian Jacques Ellul. In keeping with his confessional heritage Ellul "mixed" God's left and right hand operations, and now and then Walt did too. No surprise, theological "mix-ups" abounded in conversations with Walt. But Walt was most often doing theology out on the streets and on the ramparts, as you'll see reading the obit below. So theological debate with Walt was always reality-based. Doctrine was tested by whether or not it worked "on the street." His mantra was something like this: "If it's Christian, it's gotta be something about Jesus. And if it's about Jesus, it's got to help people." That's not far from the double-dipstick of the Lutheran Confessions: "That Christ's merits and benefits not be wasted and that sinners get genuine comfort from those benefits."

And then there was always this: not that Walt needed any protector, but he was Bob Bertram's brother-in-law, so

We were buddies enough, so that early on Walt finessed my first ever publication, "Bible Lessons for the Church Year." He hustled the LCMS youth-ministry folks at the "Walther League" to print it. It's a 216-page week-by-week- mimeographed manual for studying the Sunday Epistle Readings through the church year. There's no date on the copy I still have. Must have been 45 years ago. And cheap! "\$3.00 for one copy. \$2.50 each for ten or

more.”

Walt was a “Mensch.” In Kant’s categories—Walt read philosophy too—a “Ding an sich.” Walt’s works, his hundreds of “living letters,” do follow him. Marie and I joined some 500 others of them at his Dec. 29 memorial service in Valparaiso.

Pasted below is the obit his kids wrote that appeared in the Gary, Indiana, newspaper.

Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder

On December 5, 2006, Walt Reiner, who described himself as a “community resource redistributor” died surrounded by family and friends. Walt, 82, was born on December 29, 1923, in Tampa, Florida, the youngest of three sons, to Otto and Frances (Mugge) Reiner. Growing up during the days of the Great Depression, Walter helped support his family from a very young age, eventually enlisting in the U.S. Navy during World War II where he participated in the first wave of attacks on Omaha and Normandy beaches, and subsequently served tours in North Africa and East Asia. [He was a communications specialist in seven landings, which meant he was one of the first on the beach helping to direct the following waves of troops – and he was only 17 or 18.] Following the War, Walter attended Springfield College in Springfield, MA, and, upon graduation, accepted a football coaching position at Valparaiso University. During his tenure as “Coach,” Walter led the Crusaders to its only bowl game in VU’s history, coaching such legends as Fred “Fuzzy” Thurston (Green Bay Packers) and earning hall-of-fame status in 2001. Walter was given leave from his coaching duties to serve

his country during the Korean War. In 1952, he returned to VU and married the love of his life, his partner, his "Schatz" (treasure), and wife of 54 years, Lois (Bertram) Reiner.

In the early 1960s, Walt was asked by former VU President, O.P. Kretzmann to begin the Youth Leadership Training Program, which sought to connect young people to programs serving the broader community and world. In 1965, Walt moved his family to Chicago where he served as Director of Prince of Peace Volunteers, guiding 34 teams of volunteers in U.S. inner cities and overseas, whose work was captured in the documentary film, "I BELIEVE," aired on NBC in 1966.

During the 1960s, Walt supported Vietnam War Conscientious Objectors and became a civil rights activist in his own right. His leadership activities and commitment to human rights sustained him through a heresy trial before the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod in 1967. From 1960 through 1968, Walt served as Director of Camp Concordia, a Lutheran [summer] camp in Gowen, Michigan.

During the late sixties, Walt was a founder of the Association of the Colleges of the Midwest's Urban Studies Program in Chicago, offering students at Valparaiso University, as well as a consortium of liberal arts colleges, the opportunity to truly experience the diversity of the city and to connect with those who were creatively addressing issues of racism, poverty, violence and other issues faced by thousands of people on a daily basis.

Returning to Valparaiso in 1969, Walt and Lois Reiner founded Valparaiso Builders Association, a predecessor organization to Project Neighbors, whose primary mission was, and continues to be, partnering with families in need to relocate to Valparaiso, offering a new sense of community in which all of its citizens

learn from and respect diversity.

Project Neighbors, under Walt's direction, has provided homes to over 300 Valparaiso residents. In developing these new relationships, particularly in and around the Hilltop neighborhood, Walt turned his attention toward other projects that impact people's lives, including the development of Maria Elena's restaurant, the creation of top quality child care and medical/dental care at Hilltop Neighborhood House and Hilltop Community Health Center, the Village Market, and the latest, the Reiner Community Center.

Walt's relentless demonstration of care for the most vulnerable and commitment to implementing creative solutions to seemingly unsolvable problems in the spirit of citizenship and motivated by his strong faith won the support of many Valpo residents who, in turn, have begun to relate to class and race in new ways. Walt promoted the generosity of the larger community and demonstrated unfettered, energetic volunteerism, serving, with Lois, as the vital catalysts for relationship-building in their local community by "thinking globally and acting locally." Walt's life's works are the subject material both of the non-fiction novel, "Bringing It Home," as well as of the documentary "Making Miracles Happen."

In 1991, Walt "retired" from his formal teaching duties as associate professor emeritus of Valparaiso University's Christ College. In that same year, Walt was the co-winner of the University's Martin Luther King award, sharing the honor with his "brother," Karl E. Lutze. The following year, Walt was awarded the "Sagamore of the Wabash," the highest honor given to a resident of the State of Indiana for lifetime service. More recently in this year, Walt and Lois were named volunteers of the year by the Porter County Community Foundation. One of Walt's greatest thrills was to be a featured "performer" on the

Planetary Blues Band CD several years ago.

Walt was predeceased by his brother, Otto Reiner, and more recently in September of this year, by his brother Dr. Ernest Reiner, co-founder of the Judeo-Christian Health Center in Tampa Florida. He is survived by Lois, his children Patricia Terrell (George) of Chicago, IL, Rebecca Reiner of Valparaiso, IN, Elizabeth Gingerich (Keith Chitwood) of Valparaiso, IN, and Mark Reiner (Linda) of Denver, CO, niece Leslie Reiner (Tony Kriseman) and nephew Chris Reiner (Kathleen Kilbride) and sister-in-law Doris, all of Tampa, FL, together with his dear grandchildren, Annie, Rachel, Dylan, Olivia, Katie, Susannah, Kyla and Clarice, and step-grandchildren Joe and Kelly Chitwood, and his larger family of community members and friends.

Walt does not want us to forget his messages translated into a lifetime of action, of building relationships and taking risks, all while keeping a sense of humor in taking one day at a time. His credo, he often said, was, "when you give up the need for power, reputation and money, you have the whole world open to you." There will be a private family burial in the Memorial Park Cemetery of Valparaiso followed by a celebration of Walt's abundant life at Immanuel Lutheran Church on Friday, December 29 (his 83rd birthday) at Immanuel Lutheran Church at 2:00 p.m., followed by a reception in the school's gymnasium. Walt and his family ask that all memorials be made to Project Neighbors, 408 Lafayette, Valparaiso, Indiana 46383, to carry on Walt's mission and legacy.

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