

Mega-Fear, Mega-Joy

Colleagues,

Bill Yancey, our pastor at Bethel Lutheran Church, St. Louis, asked me to supply the homily for Christmas Day in the morning. Two homilies on the evening before, he said, prompted him to send in a sub for this morning. Here's what I prepared. Give or take, this is what was proclaimed.

The assigned lectionary text is the "shepherd-part" of Luke's Christmas gospel—vv. 8-20 of chapter 2.

Christmas Peace and Joy—both Mega
Ed Schroeder

The Shepherds and the Angels

8And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. 9An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. 10But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. 11Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. 12This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger." 13Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, 14"Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests."

15When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about."

16So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. 17When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, 18and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. 19But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. 20The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

Mega-fear, mega-joy. That's the theme for this morning. I'm not making this up, but taking it straight from Luke's text for this Christmas morning. You don't see that in the English text I just read. In Luke's own Greek language the shepherds "feared a mega-fear" and the angels proclaimed a "mega-joy." Mega is not just very big. Mega is off the charts. In both cases they refer to the "mega-agenda" in our lives—in all people's lives. The mega-agenda is the human heart, in Biblical imagery, the God-box: what is your heart hanging on in that God-box, and what do you get from your heart-hanging? Mega-fear or mega-joy?

But before we get into Luke's own mega-fear, mega-joy text, one more sortie into Luke's Greek vocabulary. His word "poimenes." The root verb behind this noun has a country tinge: roaming the fields on the lookout while taking care of something, or someone. Could be livestock. Could be people. Shepherds are caretakers. So aren't we all? Both caretakers of other folks, and folks ourselves who need—at least, want—other folks to take care of us too. To attend to us. If nothing else to give us some attention.

So back to the fields of Bethlehem. The Christmas story—out in the country—is talking about us.

Diagnosis: Shepherds need shepherding. Why? and How much?

- A. Often in the dark. In other places in the NT the word “poimenes” is used for pastors. And the Latin word “pastor” is the nickel-word for shepherd. Folks out in the pasture. It’s all connected. Luke may well be punning here in telling us of the shepherds “in the fields” on Christmas Eve. He may also be talking about pastors in Christian congregations at the time he was writing this—decades after the story he’s telling us. Caretakers, but caretakers benighted. In the dark. True for us caretakers too? You fill in the blanks. Both sides. In the dark in our own callings to be caretakers of others. And our own darkness about just what sort of caretaking we ourselves are most in need of. Even mega-darkness. But that analysis is now coming.
- B. Frightening things happen. Sometimes BIG. “Mega fear” is Luke’s word for it. And note what made this fear so “mega” for the shepherds in today’s text. It’s judgment day. Apocalypse Now. Or so they thought. Maybe they were right. Us too? Note the image for the apocalypse out there in the shepherds’ field. All the lights go on in the middle of the night. Everything gets illuminated. God’s illumination of everything around us. And inside us too. Not just the inside fear, but the inside stuff that is frightful—even to me! Who needs that much illumination—from whatever sources it comes? Also what gets exposed is our “mini-fears,” fears about very serious stuff, but stuff that darkens our minds from seeing the rightful Mega-fear that comes when we interface God. To fear the mini- and ignore the mega- is indeed frightful. It leads to Luke’s own third-level depth diagnosis.
- C. Luke’s choice term for depth diagnosis is LOST. That word isn’t in today’s text, but it’s a biggie for Luke

elsewhere when Jesus digs all the way down into the bad stuff. See Luke 15 (only in Luke, these three parables all end up LOST). The third one about God losing his own kids—both the one we call the prodigal (hell-raising) son and the “good-guy” son who played it straight, but still wound up hating both his father and brother. In a word: LOST, really lost! One guy lost in his UNrighteousness, the other lost in his righteousness. Both needing a Mega-rescuer. What losers need most is a winner. To cope with losses you need savings. Better said, a Savior. Which is the angelic word in the midst of the shepherds’ MEGA fear at the Apocalypse Now that came their way. Savior and salvation in Biblical language are not religious terms. Savior is a rescuer. Salvation is getting rescued. It’s today’s jargon—every day in the media—“rescue package.” Savior is a daily life term in Biblical days—and at the end of 2008. Needed when you’re LOST is a RESCUER.

A Mega-Caretaker for Caretakers who need Mega-Rescue

- D. Comes now what makes this story Gospel, “glad tidings of great (the word is mega again) joy.” Why? A Rescuer. And the angels (remember, in Biblical language the main point is not wings and flying, but as we’ve learned to say, angels are God’s agents busy “messaging.” ANGELOS (Greek word) simply means messenger. Someone telling you something you don’t know, but need to know, and pointing the way to go. And these messengers point to the Rescuer—mega-rescuer from persistent-darkness, mega-fear, and when we’re lost, lost big-time. Not us, say the messengers, but over there—as wild and weird as that may seem—human baby, stable-manger, swaddling cloths. There’s the Mega-rescuer for the Mega-lost ones. Humans need a human rescuer, so THE rescuer has to start out human—aka a neonate, an infant—a baby. The add-on

about “lying in a manger” is already an extra clue. Not just for how strange this Rescuer is, but for what sort of rescuer we need. Same Greek words that Luke will use at the end of the story: “wrapped (now in linen) . . . and laid (in the tomb).” But that’s the rescuer we caretakers need. For we are caretakers who need a caretaker–mega-version. Big time need for a rescuer: benighted, fearful and fearsome, finally lost. Remember that means “Lost to God.” God’s Mega-Shepherd is out to rescue what God’s lost. So he starts with sending his own Best Boy, his Mega-Son, to find us.

We need a mega-caretaker for the whole nine yards of our lives—from the cradle to the grave. So the Mega-caretaker starts there too. But it’s only step one. To carry out the full job—given the mess of the benighted/fearful ones—he’s on his way beginning at Bethlehem to the wrapping and lying at the end of his life. We need a rescuer from the cradle to the grave—and so he is. There were two monosyllables in the angels’ message to urge us to connect with this Manged Messiah: “FOR YOU this day a rescuer. So come and see. Here’s what you will find.”

In Luke’s language that’s an invitation to faith. Come here, trust this rescuer. When you do, Lost is Found. Loser has a Saver. Strays get rescued. Losers become winners.

That’s what gets messaged to us this day again.

E. Which leads to Joy. Mega Joy trumps Mega Fear. In Biblical lingo joy and happiness are not synonyms. Joy comes with Good News about the mega-agenda of our lives. In Biblical perspective you can even be crying your eyes out and still have JOY. Things can be going to hell in a hand basket,

the you-know-what can be hitting the fan, it can be apocalypse now. Take a second and name the alligators right now in your life. BUT . . . but linked to the Rescuer, YOU are not LOST, not at all a loser—even should you lose everything! None of these monsters, none of these losses, can make YOU a LOSER. Christ the FINDER, is Christ the KEEPER.

Happiness it is not, but laughter does come with joy. The Rescuer, remember, had the last laugh over the last nemesis. Entombment was not the end of his line. Easter Sunday was. He has the last laugh on all the alligators—Judas, Herod, Pilot, death itself. So do we who hang our hearts on him. His trumping death was also FOR US. So we get the last laugh too.

- F. Taking over the angels' job in the spaces and places where folks are benighted, where mega-fears still tyrannize. Note that in today's text Luke predicates to the shepherds AFTER they've encountered the Rescuer—after faith in this one—the same verbs that the original messengers had: "Glorifying and praising God." Not just in generic terms, but "For all that they had seen and heard." Not primarily to make God happy, but to get the message out. To do messaging. To be messengers, to be angels—yes, wingless ones. That's the last piece of the Christmas story. US. All of us in the the individual "shepherd-fields" where we live. Here's where the Lost are still wandering around like stray sheep. Here's where darkness outshadows the day. Where all sorts of alternate rescuers are on the scene. But they are most often lost sheep too. Their mini-flashlights don't work to illuminate the mega-darkness, don't expose the whole nine yards of the human dilemma. Thus they never get to THE RESCUER who handles the whole nine yards, the Rescuer in the Bethlehem manger. The Lost

need to do some finding for themselves. As the angels said, “You will FIND the Mega-rescuer wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.” Remember that old ZIGGY cartoon? He’s staring at one of those wall maps where an arrow points to say “You are here.” But then there’s a second arrow with this message: “You should be THERE!”

That’s the Christmas assignment for us human caretakers. Do for folks what the wall map did for Ziggy. “You are Here. You should be There.” Namely THERE is where the mega-rescue package is. The Mega bail-out. Here’s what it is: mega-darkness enlightened. Mega-fear trumped by joy. The lost get found. Mega-losers become mega-winners. Luke’s angels are messaging it to us this morning. After the benediction the angelic assignment passes over to us. The voice from the manger says: “OK, now that you’ve been shepherded at my manger (again), from now on the angels’ job is yours. GO for it.”

Abraham’s Paradoxical God – God Most High and God Most Low(ly) [An offering from Frederick Niedner]

Colleagues,

As most of the Thursday Theology Tribe knows, several dozen members of the related Crossings Community gathered for a Second International Conference back in October 2008. The First International Conference (January 2007) had pondered the theme,

“Honest-to-God Gospel for Today’s Church and World: Why Luther’s distinction of Law and Gospel matters more than ever.” This latest conference kept the same sub-title, but this time asked as its theme question, “Who do you say that ‘I Am?’— Getting Honest about God.”

For openers, the conference heard a keynote address by the Rev. Dr. Steven Kuhl, president of the Crossings Community board of directors, whose day job finds him teaching theology at Cardinal Stritch University in Milwaukee. Steve writes regularly for Crossings publications (Thursday Theology and Sabbathology) and instead of having spare time, or even a Sabbath, perhaps, he serves as interim pastor of Bethlehem Lutheran Church in Muskego, Wisconsin. He pursues this complex vocation with all the energy of a second-career pastor and theologian making up for lost time. Steve was once an up and coming aeronautical engineer, but he eventually found that work less than fulfilling and abandoned the science of air and hardware for pursuit of the Spirit who blows where it wills.

This ThTh entry comes as a “review” of Steve Kuhl’s keynote address, “Abraham’s Paradoxical Experience of God: Fear and Trusting the God Who Promises to Save Us from God’s Self,” which readers can easily enough peruse for themselves at the Crossings web-site:

<https://crossings.org/conference/papers/AbrahamsParadoxicalGod1.pdf>

Since the entire essay is so readily available, and because this reviewer has neither criticisms to make nor bones to pick with Steve Kuhl, what follows is a brief summary and a playful, theological engagement with the conference keynote address.

Today’s quests to identify and know God don’t differ substantially from ancient attempts to do the same, including

those upon which we can eavesdrop in the Bible. New Age gurus, entrepreneurial eastern sages, fundamentalist ranters, and apocalyptic prophets all steer us to the deity whom the ancient king of Salem, Melchizedek, identified for Abraham as El Elyon, "The Most High God." Even agnostics and atheists bow before this exalted, mighty, and demanding ruler of the universe, for this is the one in whom they cannot believe or whom they can never know for certain.

This deity is real enough, Kuhl reminds us, but this is the God whom we meet also in the stories of curse and punishment that follow immediately upon the biblical stories of creation. The Most High God hates our cunning ways, our bloody violence, and all our other sins, and gives us leave to live in a world of serpents, thorns, pain, confusion, and death.

This God both is and isn't the same one Moses encounters in the burning bush scene of Exodus 3, the one who self-identifies in that moment as "I Am." This is the same God whom Melchizedek knows but agnostics don't in the sense that there is but one God, and that God has consigned the race that plays God, kills brothers and sisters, and covers its nakedness with excuses to a life under the accursedness of getting precisely what it wanted. It is not the same God in the sense that the God whom Moses meets claims to be the God of Moses' ancestors, and that would include Abraham and Sarah, to whom God offered the sun, moon, and stars as signs of God's promise to bring blessing to a world that up to then knew only curse, and to do that blessing precisely through them—through their own flesh and blood.

Abraham and Sarah trusted this promise, though their flesh and blood didn't look all that promising at the time, and they became the parents of all who trust in this promising God and the promises this God makes, right down to the present day. This is the God who, as Kuhl reminds us, saves us from God's own

curse, and thus from God's own self as the hidden but very real God known in a veiled way also to Melchizedek, the gurus, assorted religious entrepreneurs, and even atheists. When this promise-making God with all that history among Moses' ancestors appears in the burning bush, and Moses asks for a calling card, God says, "I Am."

"I am who I am," that's my name. So today, who do we say "I Am" is? We confess that I Am is the promising God, the one whom we see in the Christ, the one who, in the very presence of the worst death-dealing that God's own curse leaves us as the reward of our labors, calls us to trust in the promise of blessing that God chooses to work in the world, now in the flesh and blood of that crucified one.

Thus far the Rev. Dr. Kuhl has led us, and it's well worth clicking on the URL above and taking a brief but clarifying journey with this trustworthy guide through the promising tradition.

Now then, let us play.

The conference theme cleverly combines two stories, the Exodus account that Kuhl invites us to probe, but also the synoptic gospels' accounts in which Jesus asks the disciples what they and other have to say about him. Recall the critical moment in the story of Moses' call:

But Moses said to God, "If I come to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?" God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM." He said further, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'I AM has sent me to you.'" (Exod 3:13-14)

We never get to see or hear the scene in which Moses must use

the information he has sought here because he knows he'll need it. Imagine, however, the scene, either in the palace before Pharaoh or in the fields among the slaves, after Moses has announced his mission, and someone asks, "OK, Mr. Liberator. And just who exactly is this God who sent you with this crazy scheme?"

Moses has authorization to say one thing in answer to that question: "I am."

Can you hear Pharaoh laughing? Or his fellow-Hebrews, who don't take Moses for much of a fellow-anything?

And yet, God's little joke proves more truth than farce, as Moses will indeed become the only glimpse of God, the promising God of the burning bush, that Pharaoh will ever see. As for the Hebrews, we'll eventually watch how they react to the absence of Moses. In Exodus 32, when Moses has gone up the mountain and stayed for 40 days, the people don't say, "Come, let's elect a new leader." No, they make for themselves a cherub, a replacement sign of God's presence in their midst. Functionally, the absence of Moses is the absence of God.

God explains this to Moses back in Exodus 7:1 – "See, I have made you like God to Pharaoh, and your brother Aaron shall be your prophet."

Such is the method and madness of the God who promises faithfulness to flesh and blood; and not only that, but embodies promise, faithfulness and blessing in the very vulnerable, accursed flesh to which the promise extends. Moses never made it to the promised land. Condemned for having let the people think he, not God, brought water from the rock (Num 20:1-13), Moses dies with the promise unfulfilled, but in the space-time understanding of the New Testament, not before he handed off the baton to the next flesh and blood embodiment of the promise

(Luke 9:31). This one, too, would die, the promise seemingly, but only seemingly, unfulfilled, and he would hand off to another flesh and blood body, one that is both his own and not his own, the one into which we are all baptized. That body is all that today's slaves and slave-masters see of the promising God who saves the accursed from God's own curse by joining them beneath its killing pall.

When asked for the name of the promising God who sends us into a world that knows El Elyon and life-under-curse so very well, we, too, say, "I am."

That answer always gets us crucified. But this time, we do the laughing. The joke, you see, like the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, is on us.

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Advent 2008

A Sequel to last week's Advent and Apocalypse in America—from Werner Elert in 1932

Colleagues,

This looks as though it was written yesterday, and not 76 years ago when Werner Elert published his Volume II of *Morphologie des Luthertums* (Morphology of Lutheranism) [Munich, 1932]. That was one year before Hitler assumed power in Germany.

In Volume I [1931] of the Morphology Elert offers his readers the “Theology and World View of Lutheranism” in three parts. One, the “Gospel Aha!” where it all began. Two, the consequences of this Aha! for “Dogma and Church.” Three, “Weltanschauung” (how you see the world when you start with the Gospel Aha!).

This first volume of Elert’s massive study designates the Gospel Aha! as the dynamic, the energy source, of the Lutheran Reformation. He then tracks the “morphology” of that “dynamis,” the manifold and complex ways and patterns into which that energy “morphed” in subsequent Lutheran history. In Volume I he works his way through the Lutheranism of the 16th and 17th centuries, presenting the Gospel’s morphing (shaping) Lutheran teaching and Lutheran church life, and then Lutheran perceptions of the world. In 1962 Concordia Publishing House published an English translation of Volume I under the title “The Structure of Lutheranism.”

Vol II traces the consequences of Lutheranism’s Aha! in shaping daily life and society up through the 19th century in those places where Lutheranism took root—not only in Europe but throughout the world. E.g., his knowledge and insight about Lutheranism in the USA is stunning. This volume two was never translated.

If all 521 pages of Elert’s volume two are a bit daunting, you can get a quick-blick from one of his essays that we posted as Thursday Theology #29—almost exactly 10 years ago on Dec. 10, 1998.

Here’s the URL: <https://crossings.org/thursday/1998/thur1210.shtml> “Lutheranism and World History” is its title.

The last three pages of Morphology volume two I’ve translated for you below. They are the concluding paragraphs of section five, Social Structures and Economics. I offer them as a sequel

to last week's "Advent and Apocalypse in America." Elert probes considerably deeper and farther than I succeeded in doing. That's always been the case.

The problems confronting modern society in the realm of economics can be approached from three directions. One is to see them as issues of technology, transportation, the distribution of world resources. Thus the once-thriving industries of the Thuringian forests came to an end not because human morality or diligence failed, but because the steam engine shifted the concentration of heavy industry away from wood to coal, when the railroad with its cheap transportation costs wiped out the decentralization of the iron industry that had previously been the case. The laboring masses relocated by this shift in technology can never be rescued from the place of their pain until they die out from childlessness. That is the solution technology offers.

Or one can address those problems as mere questions of capital, issues of financial value. Carried to its consequence this procedure calculates every human activity, not only human work at the machine, but also at the desk, in fact, the whole creation and everything humans produce (from governments to church bells), and finally human beings as well according to their monetary value. And they are then managed—and finally disposed of—accordingly. That means the end of the Western world, which today already is losing its commitment to "accountability" to others on the planet, and then aside from this accountability has absolutely nothing more to lose. In this model of economics standardized humans with standardized production, standardized pleasures and standardized minds have no individual color at all. They are all gray.

Or the third option. You can hope to master those problems with

a fundamentally ethical program. That may be the method of charity for the oppressed, or class struggle, or the social gospel with its proposals to create the Kingdom of God on earth by bringing democracy to the whole world. These basically ethical possibilities still seemed plausible yesterday. [Elert is writing in 1932.] But today their naivete about the realities of our situation has been shattered.

These solutions born of ethical considerations and ethical energy are the weakest of all. That's also true of the doctrine of class struggle. [1932 is just 15 years after the Bolshevik revolution in Russia.] It separates the owners and the expropriated like sheep and goats, like the good and the evil, and believes that the good will win. That is "Aberglaube," a false faith. Even the medieval church, which did indeed have great moral power, dared to proclaim "owning nothing" only as an "evangelical counsel" for monastics, but not for society at large. Communism draws its practical impulsive force exclusively from human desire for goods that communism has not produced and according to its own nature never can produce. One could understand communism and class struggle and even acknowledge it as a violent attempt of self-help for rescue from intolerable conditions, as shaking off the vampire that sucks all the victim's blood. But it cannot cage the beast ready to spring in every human heart.

For those who are not convinced of this from other sources, the solid evidence for this is that every communist program calls for coercive force, not only to create the social and economic order it envisions, but to keep it in place once it has arrived. The only exception to that is Tolstoy. Yet his doctrine comes from principles of the peasant world of Old Russia. In his "Kreuzer sonata" he envisions the willing demise of the entire human race. His themes on closer examination are all privileges of the bourgeoisie.

Beyond all that, there is one thing that communism and capitalism and the believers in technological progress all share, and that is the capitulation of the human race to economics, with the word economics understood in the broadest possible sense. In all three options the same "Weltanschauung," world-view, is at work, whose explicit components cannot be denied.

The economy has become an inescapable dynamis of our personal life and the life of our society—in much the same way that Luther could not escape "reason" as soon as he started to think. He too accepted the necessity of taking reason's path to its bitter end. Many of today's blasphemies about economy call to mind—often verbatim—his eruptions about despair. Were we to think through the current economic and social world we live in, think it through to the end, we too would stand exactly before Deus absconditus [God in hiding] as he did.

His theophany [Aha!] came when he no longer sought to evade, but stood still and simply listened. With this we have brought this book [all 1000 pages] to full circle. [Elert's volume one begins with Luther's "primal experience" of striving to cope with Deus absconditus.] For the question, what proposal Lutheran churches have to solve these economic problems, there is but one answer: None at all.

But faith in the Gospel Aha! born from primal despair celebrates resurrection from the death of this capitulation. People trusting this Gospel surmounted not only the mass deaths of the Thirty Years War. Such Christ-trusters were not only strong in bearing that cross and valley of sorrows. That itself was indeed something. But even more, Christ-trusters go to work living a particular ethos, a specific quality of human life. They do not imagine that whatever good they achieve in the world constitutes the Kingdom of God—or ever could be that. Such fanciful conceit

is nothing other than cowardice in the face of death. Rather such believers, since they are now at peace with God, see death (as Matthias Claudius put it) no longer as an enemy. They acknowledge their limits and know that they are but fleeting and minuscule pieces of creation.

But this is really THE creation, God's creation where God's structures when broken do indeed bring recompense. These are the fundamental relationships of man and woman, people and nations, governments and law, and also a wholesome pattern of economic life. The tragedy of our time is bankruptcy of the human soul, evoked by the absolutizing of the last of these relationships, economics. The consequence is scant concern for all the others. For this reason it is only the empty eyes of "entseelter Menschen" [humans with no more soul] that stare at us when we seek to solve every economic crisis. The creator has once more become the hidden God—from whom there is no escape.

The "other" apocalypse of our Lord Jesus Christ is no escape either, but it is sur-vival, "living through" the encounter with deus absconditus and coming out alive on the other side. Billions of treasury bills won't do anything to redeem "entseelte Menschen." There's only one way. It began with the mangled Messiah.

Peace and Joy!
Ed Schroeder

Advent and Apocalypse in America—a Triad for Crossing.

Colleagues,

Funny thing happened in California last week. Marie and I were there for Thanksgiving at my sister's home in Ukiah, 100 miles north of San Francisco. We were using up our remaining Frequent Flyer Miles before they expired. These miles we'd chalked up from our last Global Mission Volunteer junket (2004) when we flew across the Pacific 4 times in that one year. Because we were "beggars" asking for a free ride on the most air-travelled weekend of every year in the USA, we couldn't be "choosers." So the airlines stretched out our Thanksgiving weekend to 10 whole days—November 23 to December 2. What to do with all that time? Even for a dear sister—and she is indeed—we stuck to the classic axiom for visitors: After three days guests, like fish, need a change of venue. So it was Wednesday through Friday with sister and family—a wild bunch with 5 brainy grandchildren home from prep school and college. Before and after that we bivouacked with Crossings folks who had heard that we were in the neighborhood and told us to stop by.

One of those alternate venues (there were three in all) came right at the outset, before the turkey stuff at Ukiah, as Pastor Stan Abraham picked us up at SFO airport, to mentor us through a couple days in Aptos on Monterey Bay. Seafood dinner with more California Crossers, the shore, the surf, the sea lions, the vistas, the multimillion-dollar homes—the whole nine yards. For Marie it was fun and games, but I had to pay the piper. How so? preside and profess at the Tuesday morning text study with Stan's group of regulars, a marvelous mix of LCMS and ELCA pastors.

So I “got to” wrestle with texts for Advent I, the Sunday just passed. Here’s what I found.

1. The Gospel for Advent I is always taken from the “apocalypse” chapter of Matthew, Mark, or Luke, whichever one is up in the current three-year lectionary. For the church year just started it is Mark 13. I didn’t have access to Jim Squire’s brilliant study of that text offered for last Sunday on the Sabbatheology listserve, so I had to wing it.
2. The word “apocalypse” does not appear in the Greek of Mark 13, but—surprise, surprise—it DOES show up in last Sunday’s second lesson, I Cor. 1:3-9. Second surprise is that it is not the cataclysmic apocalypse portrayed in Mark 13. Instead it is the “apocalypse of our Lord Jesus Christ,” a “good news” apocalypse, no cataclysm at all. But the two are related.
3. Christ’s mercy-apocalypse is so good that Christ-trusters are “safe” – aka “saved”— when any cataclysmic apocalypse comes. That applies both to the one way at THE END, and also to apocalypses that are not across the whole cosmos, but “little” apocalypses where my own individual world, the “mini-cosmos” I’ve built for myself, comes crashing down.
4. In fact, it seems to have been the disciples’ own faulty vision that opens chapter 13 in Mark. They ask: “When, Jesus, will we see all this apoc alypse-stuff take place? It’s obviously somewhere in the future, right?” “Not so,” he says, “I’m talking about ‘this generation.’” How long do you have to wait for false Messiahs to show up? How long do you have to wait for “nation against nation”? For earthquakes? For famine? For people being led astray? For persecution? Betrayal? Terrible things happening—yes, happening to you? When your own personal and private

heaven and earth (the mini-cosmos where you are secure) will pass away? The topic in Mark 13 is apocalypse now, not apocalypse some day, although there will be more tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow.

5. We need to take the term literally: apo-calyptse = take the veil away. You can have your eyes open, but if there's a veil in front of those eyes, then "seeing, you do not see." There are four different Greek verbs in Mark 13 for looking, watching or seeing. The four together appear 13 times in the text. It's all about seeing or not seeing. The faulty vision of the disciples is the D-1 (diagnosis, first step) of their problem. Even with eyes wide open, they are not seeing the "apocalypse now" confronting them.
6. Aren't these the ones, the personal cataclysmic apocalypses, that Luther is talking about in his "Mighty Fortress" hymn.

*"Were they to take our house,
Goods, honor, child or spouse,
Though life be wrenched away . . ."
That's the cosmos that has my name on it—wrenched away.*

*Yet Christ's alternate apocalypse—the big unveiling on
Good Friday and Easter—trumps all of that.*

*"Whom God himself elected . . .
Christ Jesus mighty Lord . . .
His verdict must prevail . . .*

*They cannot win the day,
The Kingdom's ours forever."*

The disciples do not get to this feisty faith in Mark 13. But Paul is ascribing it to the Corinthians in last Sunday's second text. More about this later.

7. With eyes still pasted shut, though they think they see, the disciples in Mark 13 suffer an even worse affliction. They are “un-awake,” un-seeing, themselves “led astray,” “un-alert” to the very Messiah who is talking to them. Hearing, but not hearing what he calls “my words,” the only ones that (so he claims) will survive any and every apocalypse now. So that’s D-2 in Crossings procedure, Step 2, signaling an “even worse” D-3 Final Diagnosis.
8. Namely, still stuck with hearts hanging on the stuff “of heaven and earth,” the cosmos that passes away. If that is where your heart is hanging, when it crumbles so do you. Apocalypse arrives when God removes the veil. And who among us is not veiled? Yes, hiding behind self-concocted hoods whereby we hoodwink ourselves to the truth—the full truth—of our personal histories and of our world’s history as well. Or as Paul puts it in second Corinthians—when “Moses’ veil is taken away,” i.e., when God’s law is unhooded and we do not have Christ’s heat shield to survive its blast, then the axiom is inevitable: sinner equals cinder.
9. The OT text for last Sunday, Isaiah 64:1-9, signals this too. Twice the prophet bemoans directly to God that “you have hidden your face from us.” God can play the veil game too. And what was still hidden for Isaiah and his people is exactly what he pleads for. Namely, that when God is engineering those burning apocalypses (vv. 1 – 7), God would “not remember [our] iniquity forever,” but remember, yes un-veil, something else. “You, O LORD, are our father and we—rascals though we be—are your kids. Though we fail our Moses contract with you, we plead the Abrahamic one. We are his kids. And trusting the promise as he did, we are your kids too. You said so. You promised.”
10. All of that finally gets unveiled in the “apocalypse of our Lord Jesus Christ.” That’s Step Four in the Crossings

process: Good News, good enough and new enough to trump any and all of the other Mosaic unveilings, where it's sinner = cinder. That includes the ones that happen today all the way to the Big One at the end. God's mercy for sinners is un-veiled on Good Friday and Easter Sunday. The hidden God of Isaiah 64 becomes the revealed-un-veiled-God outside the walls of Jerusalem on that weekend.

11. If you look a bit closer, that Good News unveiling is actually narrated with stage settings from the Final Apocalypse. "The sun's light failed. The earth shook, and the rocks split. The tombs were opened and many . . . were raised." Bob Bertram often referred to this apocalypse of Christ as one that "scooped" the grim apocalypse at the end—and all the ones prior to it. Because he took the heat of the "sinner = cinder" apocalypse, folks trusting him cash in on his promissory offer: "I did it for you. It's yours for nothing more than faith. Faith alone. Trust it, you have it. And here's what you have: trusting me you've got all your apocalypses—including the Big One—already behind you. The next one, as well as the last one, 'cannot win the day.'" [that's step 5 in the Crossings matrix.] Christ's apocalypse initiates God's new regime in an otherwise "passing away" world. Christ is The Word at the center of this new regime. In the face of any and every apocalypse—think the last musical line of Luther's hymn—"His kingdom's ours forever."
12. The move to Step 6 in the Crossings matrix—and here we go back to Mark 13—is to live our lives in the world under this regime. Hanging on to "words that will not pass away" amid all the apocalypses where otherwise solid stuff, things that people build their lives on, do indeed "pass away." And not being surprised whenever it happens, whether "at evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn." Doing our daily work of caring for creation with

the additional calling of hustling Christ's apocalypse, God's mercy regime for sinners, to rescue them as we were rescued from the inexorable law of sinner = cinder. In Mark 13 Jesus signals that with such words as: "The good news must first be proclaimed to all peoples. So when you are on the witness stand, give testimony of the alternate apocalypse you live by, for it is not you who speak, but the Holy Spirit." Christ's "keep awake" mandate is more than just "don't doze off and be left behind when the Big One comes," but "keep awake to the assignment I've given you. You are the 'angels' (=messengers) whom I send out to the ends of the earth to gather the elect from wherever the wind blows. And they become 'elect' when you proclaim the good news to them."

The apocalypse of our Lord Jesus Christ is the message. His "Stay alert" is "Stay on message."

So much for "Grounding," in the Biblical text. After which in the ancient days of Crossings courses and workshops came phase two: "Tracking" a slice of life today. Call it a contemporary text. Then came phase three: "Crossing" the two texts, today's slice of life and the Biblical text.

It may not yet be clear to all in America that is is indeed Apocalypse Now in our land—and from our land out into the entire planet. Even secular analysts are saying so. Most are not daring to use the God-word in their rhetoric, probably because they don't believe it applies. Even the US president-elect believes Jeremiah Wright was wrong as he encouraged his congregation to stop reciting the mantra "God bless America," when the opposite was patently the truth of the matter. But, of course, it is not patent. Surely not in America's public square. Sadly, not in the churches either in any audible way. All of Obama's proposed team members agree with his prose: "Times are tough, but we can fix

it.” Not so, when it’s apocalypse now. If you don’t even acknowledge the presence of the veil-puller-offer and think you and your team are able to take the heat with your own resources—such as billions now somehow therapeutic to cope with the billions that are lethal—you too will pass away. Cinders.

One strange exception among the “secular” analysts was a news clipping brought along by Joe Strelan when he came up from Downunder for the Crossings conference a few weeks ago. It’s from The Weekend Australian Magazine (October 11-12, 2008) by Phillip Adams, whom I’d never heard of. Googling I learned (from Wikipedia) this: Phillip Andrew Hedley Adams (born 12 July 1939) is an Australian broadcaster, film producer, writer, humanist, antiquities collector, social commentator, satirist, left-wing pundit and atheist. “I’ve been an atheist since I was five.” His father was a Methodist minister.

Even so, listen to these paragraphs from this atheist’s “God-talk.”

Among my collection of antiquities are fragile fragments of papyrus that look every bit as old as the Dead Sea Scrolls. But they’re as hard to date as they are to translate. I’ve managed to make some sense of the text, though, during my many insomniac nights. So do the papyri have anything to say about recent events? Yes! There are clear warnings about “Palin heresies.” I’ve passed this papyrus on to both McCain and Obama.

Even more remarkable revelations and prophecies come on a larger fragment helpfully headed “Revelations and Prophecies.” They may well be related to the bad news in the business pages of this very newspaper.

“Verily I say unto you, your day of judgment will fall in the

year of our Lord 2008. Sinners who walked tall on Wall Street instead of humbly along the Road to Damascus will be detoured through the Valley of Death and into deserts of financial despair. Accursed will be the brothers of Lehmann. Their once-proud profits will be without honor in their own country and through the global economy.

“Those who thought greed good and who worshipped at the golden calf rather than goodness and God, who showed no mercy to those in need, who held their cards of gold higher than they held Jehovah, will be toppled from the pedestals and cast into the fiery pit of failed fiscal policies.

“Verily, they will be as accursed as the moneylenders Christ drove from the temples they fouled with their sub-prime mortgages. They shall be placed into junk bondage and forced to wander the deserts of devalued derivatives and fiscal-re-regulation. Like their bonuses, their plump Porsches will pucker and their Ferraris rust. Oh ye despoilers of the dolorous dollar, ye shall crawl on your bellies like snakes, or use public transport.”

There's mention of a new 10 commandments but I can't find all of them. “Thou shalt have no other God before Me” survives, as does the reference to lusting after they neighbor's wife or ox. But that's been modified . . . the ox is now a BMW.

The others seem to be regulatory recommendations. “Thou shalt not take the widow's mite nor tempt her with filthy riches” and “thou shalt not hide thy money in the Bahamas and refuse to give unto the ATO [=the Aussie IRS] the things that are the ATO's.”

There are big threats about Sodomizing Wall Street, in the sense of shock and awe. And a reference to a burning bush is about burning George W in fire and brimstone. For sins including the claim that the Lord supported the Iraq invasion. If I were Bush

I'd get out of the White House before the elections as the Lord is threatening to Gomorrah Washington.

It's not clear whether the past few weeks have seen the last Judgment or just a trial balance. But he's really pissed off.

So far an Aussie atheist's analysis. Is his vision blurred, or is he clairvoyant [=seeing clearly]? You can guess what my answer is. Even Balaam's burro saw the angel of judgment that the bumbling prophet was blind to.

Let's call Adams' rant a "Tracking" of America. Now to "Crossing" it with last Sunday's "Grounding" texts.

Diagnosis. Level -1 Blindness. Thirteen verbs for seeing, looking, watching and not one of them is working in the body politic. Example. Yesterday the official word was out in US media: "It IS a recession. Fact is, it's been a recession since December last year, but we didn't see it."

D-2 Hanging our hearts on false Messiahs—people and policies that will save us. You fill in the blanks. Even Obama's highly hyped "change!" sure looks like re-arranging deckchairs on the Titanic. Nobody sees the iceberg. [Yes, there was this guy who once was his pastor]

D-3. The God-problem at the root of it all. Diagnostician Phillip Adams is right, atheist though he be. As is non-atheist Jeremiah Wright. It is Judgment Day. And so severe is the judgment that the folks being judged haven't a clue that it is God who is pushing Humpty-Dumpty off the Wall (Street). We need to think of that every time we hear the new terror word on everyone's lips, "crisis." Crisis doesn't mean "hard times." It's the NT Greek word of judgment. Judgment day is Crisis day. When the NT speaks of crisis, God is always the critic. Crisis

day is apocalypse now. The party is over.

Is there any Gospel cross-over for this? Probably not for the USA as nation.

Did you notice in the appointed Gospel [Matt. 25] for November 23, the last Sunday in the church year just concluded, that it was the "nations," not individual folks, who were arrayed before Christ the judge? It's the nations who get sorted out as sheepish or goatish. The yardstick for measuring the survival or death sentence of nations is not faith, but works. Nations pass or fail God's judgment by the yardstick of performance. In Lutheran lingo it's all according to God's left hand rubrics of carrying out God's law of preservation and fair recompense. Did you care for the poor, or increase poverty among your people? Did you visit the imprisoned and care for them or did you engineer the largest prison population of any nation in the modern world? Did you, did you, did you? You say you didn't notice these "least" people? Too bad. The final exam is "pass/fail." Here's your report card. You didn't make it. The party's over.

Nations don't get saved. Promise-trusting people do. And for that, go back to number 10, 11, 12 above.

Way back in 1952 when I was an exchange student in Germany, just a few years after the end of the Second World War, I learned that for many a Christian during those days of Germany's Apocalypse Now—both the one inflicted BY Germany and the one inflicted ON Germany—the OT book of Ecclesiastes and the last book in the NT had become favored texts. Actually eye-openers. Ecclesiastes with its unveiling of the emptiness of lives that cling to the stuff of "heaven and earth," and St. John's Revelation (Greek title: apocalypsis) for Christian coping—yes, Christian survival—when it all comes tumbling down.

We once offered a Crossings semester-long course on the Book of Revelation. Maybe I can dig out the syllabus and tell you about it sometime. But for now take another look at #10, 11, and 12 above. That's also St. John's solid grounding for

Peace and Joy—especially when it's apocalypse now.
Ed Schroeder

A Lutheran “Op-ed” for Bible Reading in the ELCA, Part IV

Colleagues,

Today's ThTh #546 is Part IV, the last batch of Werner Elert's theses on Lutheran hermeneutics for reading the Bible. Prior postings #543, 544, 545 gave you the specs on where they came from. Here's the last set of “Feste Sätze” (solid sentences) from Elert's Chapter Two: “The What and How of God's Revelation.”

Peace and joy!
Ed Schroeder

#17 What Now Can Be Said About the Holy Scriptures

1. Just what is the authority of the Bible? That question confronts each individual Christian. It also confronts the total church, the church at large. What is its authority for me as an individual believer, what is its authority for the church in its common life and work?

2. [For the individual person] The OT and NT scriptures gain their authority for individual Christians as God's word of law—in all three aspects: God as creator, as legislator, as judge—speaking directly to them, and as God's word of Gospel meant for them.[In Elert's dogmatics book, "The Christian Faith," this thesis is followed by several pages on the "shortcomings of the doctrine of scriptural inspiration." That was what I was taught—in catechism class—growing up in the Missouri Synod. It is still a cornerstone of much of American Christianity.]

A. Elert begins by noting that there is no "doctrine" about scripture at all—let alone a doctrine of its "inspiration"—in Luther's theology, nor in the Lutheran Confessions. The Roman Church formulated one at the Council of Trent in the mid-16th century and the Reformed Confessions, following the example of Calvin, attached great value to such a doctrine about the Bible itself. Lutheran theologians in subsequent centuries following Calvin's lead thought they needed to fill in the blank that Luther and the Confessions had left empty.

B. But in doing so they made a fateful shift away from the Augsburg Aha! Namely, the Lutheran Confessors' claim that Christian faith is ALWAYS a faith that trusts Christ's promise, and the Gospel is just such a promise. That is where the Gospel's authority comes from. Christ himself is the grounds for trusting what he says. The issue of authority is not "is the Bible trustworthy?" but "is Christ trustworthy?" And that is, of course, where you might begin to wonder. Is Christ trustworthy when he says: "Be of good cheer, your sins are forgiven (or) Come unto me all you distressed folks and I will give you rest (or) Today you will be with me in

paradise"? Many who heard those words when first uttered did NOT think they were trustworthy. At least not without additional evidence that he had "authority." So folks not convinced asked for additional "signs." Specifically something miraculous that would make it "perfectly clear" that he had God's authorization. But when pressed for just such signs, he said no. There's a parallel here to the doctrine of inspiration. Once you begin to think that you first have to establish the Bible's authority before Christ is trustworthy, you have already turned your back on the Augsburg Aha! Possibly even turned your back on Christ's offer. It's a slippery slope. All inspiration doctrines seek to "add" something to Christ's own authority, to shore it up, to make it REALLY credible by showing that it comes straight from God (through human writers, yes, but with no human interference) and therefore must be 100% reliable. Such an "add on" to Christ's own authority—grounded in his cross and resurrection—is of the same sort as "add ons" to the Gospel message itself. "Besides trusting Christ you gotta be circumcised if you're a male (Galatians)." "You gotta be a tongues-speaking charismatic to be 100% Christian (Corinthians)." You gotta believe in the authority of Biblical inspiration before Christ's promise is credible. And if you don't believe in that doctrine of Biblical inspiration, then your Christian faith is defective. Trusting Christ alone doesn't do it. You gotta, you gotta, you gotta.

When Christ's trustworthiness depends on something else that "guarantees" his words to be true, we are encountering an "other" Gospel. Faith is not

believing Biblical doctrines, even doctrines about Christ. Even less is it believing a doctrine about the Bible. Christian faith is trusting Christ's promise. That's it.

- C. Elert examines the two classic NT texts that use the word—2 Timothy 3:16 (All scripture is inspired by God) and 2 Peter 1:21 (Men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God). In these two texts it is only the Old Testament that existed at that time, so these texts refer only to that—and not at all to what we call the New Testament. But NT apostles now and then claim their message to be the product of the Holy Spirit, and thus inspired too. There is no argument with such claims of inspiration. When you deduce a “doctrine” of the Bible's authority from the inspiration of the Scriptures, you undermine precisely what the apostles are claiming when they speak of scriptural inspiration—both for OT texts and for NT texts. The whole point of the apostles' claim for the Holy Spirit active in scriptural texts—both in the OT and in the NT that these very apostles are creating as they do their writing— is that here too the Holy Spirit is at work doing the Spirit's single-focused job assignment. And what is that? It is an assignment coming from Christ himself: “The Holy Spirit will take what is mine and declare it to you.” The Spirit's “job” is not communicating divine doctrines—otherwise unknown to us—for us to believe. It is instead “pushing Christ” for us to trust. The fundamental flaw in the doctrine of inspiration is what it says about faith. Elert's own words: “The inspiration doctrine adulterates and destroys faith in the NT sense. The compelling

element that leads someone to faith in the Gospel is always and only the person of Christ. That was true for his first apostles. They needed no doctrine of inspiration to urge them to trust Christ. When in their writings we hear them say: 'We appeal to you, be reconciled to God through Christ,' they do not appeal to their own inspiration. Instead they urge us to trust Christ, not because they were inspired, but because they bear witness to Christ as they themselves heard and saw Him. Strictly speaking, this is the only way that WE today can connect with Christ. The apostles' writings which we have today, just like their oral proclamation of long ago, are the medium—but not the foundation—for faith in Christ. The work of the Holy Spirit in these apostolic writings—call it their inspiration—resides solely in the Christ-promise that they are urging upon their readers. If we try to get back behind this Gospel-center to ground our faith on some earlier inspiring act of God that then urges us to trust Christ, we are pulling the rug out from under faith itself."

3. [For the church at large] the problem of Biblical authority divides into three specific issues: A) the authority of the NT, B) the authority of the OT, and C) the canonicity of the individual NT books [The "canonicity" question is: are they authentic, genuine, trustworthy? Do all of these 27 NT books really "belong" in the NT?]
4. Starting with issue A. The authority of the NT books for the church resides in their character as source and norm.
5. Source. The NT books are the only authentic source that exists for what can be known about God's revelation in human history that occurred in Christ. Why? It is only eye-

and ear-witnesses who could testify authentically to what was said and done [Luke 1:2; 1 John 1:1]. We today have no access to that oral testimony, but only to the written testimony they have given us.

6. Norm. The NT is the only and absolute norm for the church's entire proclamation (kerygma), since the apostles themselves—once they had received the Holy Spirit promised to them by Christ—became organs for God's self-revelation, and because all subsequent church life and work must be normed by this revelation. The NT functions as norm, as a yardstick, in that all proposals for what should be proclaimed, enacted, practiced as "Christian" is measured by this test: Is it congruent with Christ's original Gospel?
7. As the one and only source and norm for what the church does, the written apostolic witness needs no supplementary additions from other witnesses. The Scriptures are "sufficient," they are "enough" for what the Gospel is. They need no additions from tradition in order to be made more complete. There are no "missing parts" to the Gospel that must be supplied from other sources.
8. Concerning the authority of the OT. Before Gentile audiences the apostles did not make the validity of their witness to Christ depend on any previous acceptance of the OT. This fact is significant also today for Christian mission to the nations of the world. Then as now, you do not become a Christian via a two-stage process—first acknowledging the OT and its authority (one could say, by first becoming a Jew) and then coming to Christ and following him. Faith in Christ is trusting Christ's promise. People throughout the world are promise-trusters of one sort or another. Every "other Gospel" in the world—sacred or secular—offers a promise of some sort, and then calls people to trust that promise.. Christian

mission at its most basic level is inviting people to let go of the promises they have been trusting and “switch” to trusting Christ’s promise. Faith in Christ does not call for disciples to visit Moses first before coming to Christ. Yet from the very beginning Christians did not turn their backs on the scriptures of the Old Testament. Why?

9. For three reasons the Christian church received the OT as a normative word of God. A) The God of the OT is also the Father of Jesus Christ and thereby—when we are linked to Christ—becomes our father too. B) In its promises the OT too is testimony to Christ. The OT promises (Abraham, David, Noah) are Gospel offers calling for the receivers to trust them. They “testify” to Christ in that Christ is the fulfillment that makes them all come true. C) The OT (not in its Mosaic law, but definitely in its prophets) is God’s word, not simply witness addressed to the ancient covenant people of Israel, but also witness about all peoples and witness addressed to all peoples of the world. Example: God’s promise to Abraham (Gen. 12:3) is for everybody in the world: “In you all the families of the earth will be blessed.”
10. For the first of those three reasons above the authority of the OT in the Christian church can be understood only as derivative from the authority of the NT. What the OT says must be understood through the prism of what the NT says.
11. It is a misleading opinion to say that the post-apostolic church is the guarantor for the NT canon—for what books genuinely belong in the NT. The early church always saw itself standing uninterruptedly under the authority of the original apostles. First it was the authority of their oral testimony, when the apostles were personally active in the church’s life, and then after their death under the

authority of their written testimony. The later church did not create the canon, they received it from the hands of the apostles.

12. There never was any doubt within the church about the canonicity ["They are OK. They belong in the NT collection of books"] of the vast majority of the NT writings. These books are called "homologoumena." [Transl. "Everybody says" they are authentic.]
13. The decisive factor for their canonicity was and is the bond between their content and where they came from. The criterion for content is that all the homologoumena engage in what Luther called "Christum treiben." They are constantly "pushing" Christ. In contrast with all later witness within the church, of which the same could also be said that they push Christ, the homologoumena are original witnesses. They are the first ones, derived from no previous source known to us. Wherever earlier sources are mentioned, for example, in Luke 1, we have no access to them. They are available to us only through the canonical homologoumena that transmit them to us.
14. The question about the canonicity of the antilegomena [=New Testament books that some early Christians dismissed as not "good enough" to be included in the canon. "Antilegomena" = spoken against.] is a question that confronts the church today just as it did the church of the fourth century. From early days in church history these seven NT books were "spoken against" in some Christian congregations and were not in the NT canon at these places: Hebrews, James, Jude, Revelation, 2 Peter, 2 & 3 John.
15. For interpreting specific passages in the scriptures there are two fundamental axioms. One is the ancient word "perspicuity." From Latin, "see through clearly." Namely, there are passages in the scriptures that present the

Gospel clearly and crisply. These passages have priority. That first axiom carries with it a corollary: when there are “dark” passages, the “clear” [perspicuous] gospel passages are to be used to understand them. The second axiom is “the analogy of faith.” That means “in synch with trusting Christ’s promise.” Here is how that works for interpreting Bible texts.

Step one: *The Gospel of Christ is the great promissory Good News throughout the Bible.*

Step two: *Therefore faith-in-the-gospel is the final yardstick for measuring what scripture is saying.*

Step three: *Since faith is always faith in the promise, and since the “clear” passages are the clear gospel proclamations in scripture, therefore these two axioms blend into each other.*

Step four: *Thus the analogy of faith means using the yardstick of faith in that “clear” promissory gospel.*

Step five: *Any interpretation of any scripture passage that contradicts “faith-in-the-promise” amounts to a misreading of the passage. Granted, there are Biblical texts where there is no “clear” Gospel at all. What to do then?*

Step six: *When we are interpreting (teaching or preaching) “unclear” Bible passages—where the Good News is “fuzzy” or there is no Good News at all—these two axioms call us to do what Melanchthon recommends in the Lutheran Confessions for such a case: “add the Gospel promise” from elsewhere in the scripture so that the Good News does come through clearly (perspecuity) and trusting that “clear” Gospel can be commended to the hearers (the analogy of faith).*

A Lutheran “Op-ed” for Bible Reading in the ELCA, Part III

Colleagues,

Today’s ThTh #545 is Part III of a four-part presentation of Werner Elert’s theses on Lutheran hermeneutics for reading the Bible. It is offered as an op-ed alternative to “Opening the Book of Faith” recently published to encourage Bible reading and study in the ELCA. These theses come from Elert’s lectures on “The Christian Faith” (aka dogmatics) at Erlangen University in Germany back in 1953. They are my English translation of what Elert called “Feste Sätze” (solid sentences) with some addenda from me. Previous postings ThTh 543 and 544 gave you sections #11 through #15 from the outline below. Today’s installment is #16. Next week’s post (American Thanksgiving Day) will, God willing—finally!—bring the conclusion: “#17 What Now Can Be Said About the Holy Scriptures (15 Feste Sätze)”.

Peace and Joy!
Ed Schroeder

Overall Outline

Chapter 2: THE WHAT AND HOW OF GOD’S REVELATION

#11 The Gospel (7 “Feste Sätze”)

#12 Faith (4)

#13 The Fateful Reality of God’s Law (4)

#14 The Concept and Dialectics of Revelation (5)

- #15 Faith's Knowledge of God and "Natural" Knowledge of God (3)
- #16 God's Way of Revealing Sinners (7)
- #17 What Now Can Be Said About the Holy Scriptures (15)

#16 God's Way of Revealing Sinners

1. God's law is God's judicial action, a courtroom-style judgment coming from a judge. God's law reveals the truth about us as God passes judgment on us.[Elsewhere in his writings (e.g., in Elert's book on ethics) he examines the term "law" as used throughout the Bible. He concludes that "law" in the Bible is more than legislation, much more than God's commands and prohibitions. Although it is that too—"thou shalt and thou shalt not." But it is larger than the ten commandments. "Law" constitutes a three-fold web that permeates all creation after the Fall. And that is the only creation we know, since we have no access to "what it was really like" back there in Eden before our primal parents' catastrophic attempt to "be like God." In the now-fallen world, the world of our daily life, God's law constitutes a three-fold revelation. It reveals three distinct "law-links" between God and humankind. These three enwrap our lives, entangling us as in a spider's web.

In the law's first "web" God is creator and "manager," giving us our existence, placing each of us in a specific context of space and time with manifold relationships—to people, places and things. None of these did we choose; they are simply the "givens" of our personal existence. From that specific location in creation our individual lives unfold as God "manages" our personal history within his governance of world history. What gets revealed in the first web is that God is the creator/manager of our life and that we are "webbed" to God as our creator/manager

whether we know it or not, whether we like it or not. We are entangled in this web by the mere fact that we exist at all somewhere in God's creation.

In the law's second "web" God is legislator, giving us orders, commandments, for how to live as his human being, as his "image," in this specific location amid all these relationships. The second "web" reveals that God has expectations, aka commandments, for how we are to "image" our creator in the many relationships where he has placed us; what gets revealed about us is that we are under obligation to fulfill these expectations, to "obey" these commandments. Luther's Small Catechism puts it this way at the end of his explanation of the creation-article in the Apostles Creed: "For all of this—[these gifts from God my creator]—I am obligated to thank and to praise, to serve and obey him." Law as God's legislation reveals a vast "web" of obligations, of tasks and assignments, within the first web mentioned above. It is a web of "oughts." Its drumbeat: "thou shalt; thou shalt not."

The law's third "web" is the one mentioned in the "Fester Satz" above: God, the judge on the bench of world history (our personal history too) evaluates us individually for how well we do as his "image." This third web puts us in the divine courtroom and we are on trial, in the dock. God the law-giver now becomes God the evaluator—and finally God the judge, who passes sentence on us for how well we have done in this complex network of many webs that makes up our personal histories. It reveals that we are overwhelmed by the web of obligations. This third web goes beyond the first two. It entangles us in a web of evaluation that reveals the value, the worth, of our lives. Simply stated: are we good or not good? Right or not right? In the law's third web that question gets

answered.]

2. In God's judicial action a verdict, a sentence, is passed on our entire lives, on everything we think or understand about ourselves. God's verdict in web number three is total.
3. Before human beings learn of God's law revealing this three-fold webbing, they encounter the reality often called fate, destiny, my "lot" in life. The word fate comes from Latin "fatum," literally "what has been spoken," in this case, spoken by someone else but now applied to me. Things don't always go the way we wish they would. We become aware of someone/something "out there in the world" over which we have no control, but which seems to have control over us. A relentless "pressure"—some days more, some days less—lets us know "You are NOT the master of your fate, NOT the captain of your soul." We resist that pressure, of course, but it doesn't go away. To that planet-wide experience comes now the revelation of God's law. Re-velation = taking the veil off. God's law reveals that what we are bumping up against here is God our creator's power and pressure, not some "veiled" mysterious "fate," as the ancient Greeks and Romans thought, nor the anonymous "karma" of Eastern religions. God's law takes the veil off. It reveals our human self-assertion against that power and pressure, our resistance and protest against it, to be in rebellion against God.
4. Through the law, not only individual sins are uncovered, but the entire human self is exposed as a person living in hostility against God (Rom. 8:7). The Biblical concept of "sin" is not individual acts of commandment-breaking. Sin is a value-word—yes, a negative value-word—about our whole person. When the word "sinner" is the truth about me, all of me, not just some part, is hostile to this

pressuring God. Sin is the “shape” of my person. That comes first. Sinful acts, breaking commandments, come as a consequence. The shape of the person determines the shape of that person’s actions.

5. By not leaving any area of our life immune from its accusation—neither some segment of our biography when we were supposedly “innocent,” nor some segment of our self right now that is not hostile—the law pushes us to the conclusion that our sinfulness has been with us from the very beginning of our physical origin. That is what the term “original sin” means: humans “by nature” living in congenital opposition to God right from the start.
6. Sin then entails guilt inasmuch as it is personally charged to our account. One element of human uniqueness among all of God’s other creatures is that human creatures are accountable to God. They get personally evaluated. God checks on them, examines them, when God moves through his creation-garden (Gen. 3) with the penetrating examination question “Where are you?” That is not a question about geography, but about obligations and responsibilities: where are you on that list of obligations I gave you? Beginning with commandment #1 “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind—all the time!” The term “guilt” carries the negative verdict of failure to carry out obligations and responsibilities. Failure is a fact. The word “guilt” adds another quality to the fact. “Guilt” says: you are in trouble because of this failure. Your “person” now carries a negative value, negative worth, because of this failure. The guilt element in sin arises from God being the examiner in the evaluation web. God is the one speaking the verdict about my negative value, the negative quality of my sinner-self, not just some human being whom I’ve failed. Though it regularly is fellow humans functioning as God’s agents who

communicate the divine verdict to me.

7. Guilt is inescapable. That is revealed by the way the law makes no exceptions as it carries out its death threat—"the soul that sinneth, it shall die"—on every human being. But that then reveals God to be a god who kills his own creatures. That is a terrifying revelation—both about God and about us. Luther's label for such a terrifying encounter with God (drawn from the Old Testament, Isaiah 45:15) is [Latin] "deus absconditus." Translated, that is "God hidden," terrifyingly hidden. No wonder Adam and Eve ran to hide from such a God. But where to go? There is no place where God's three webs don't entangle us. Everywhere sinners turn to escape Deus Absconditus they run into a sign: No Exit. Which ups the ante about God's self-revelation in law to fearful dimensions and prompts sinners, who have just been exposed by this law-revelation, to cry out: Is there any OTHER revelation of God, one which might rescue us from this revelation of deus absconditus? The good news is: There is indeed another revelation from the same God. It is THE Good News, aka God's Gospel. That was the other revelation we started with above in Section #11.

[Next time: 17th and final section—What Now Can Be Said About the Holy Scriptures (15 Feste Sätze)]

An "Op-ed" for Bible Reading

in the ELCA, Part II

Colleagues,

Today's ThTh #544 is a continuation of an op-ed alternative to "Opening the Book of Faith" recently published to encourage Bible reading and study in the ELCA.

A number of you said "more" when I asked last week if I should continue passing on to you Werner Elert's "Feste Sätze" [thesis sentences] about the Bible. These theses came from his lectures on "The Christian Faith" (aka dogmatics) at Erlangen University in Germany back in 1953. So here are some more. Remember, they are my English translation of Elert's German with some addenda from me. Last week's ThTh post gave you #11 from the outline below. Today's post starts with #12.

Peace and joy!

Ed Schroeder

Overall Outline

Chapter 2: THE WHAT AND HOW OF GOD'S REVELATION

#11 The Gospel (7 Feste Sätze)

#12 Faith (4)

#13 The Fateful Reality of God's Law (4)

#14 The Concept and Dialectics of Revelation (5)

#15 Faith's Knowledge of God and "Natural" Knowledge of God (3)

#16 God's Way of Revealing Sinners (7)

#17 What Now Can Be Said About the Holy Scriptures (15)

#12 Faith (4)

1. What is faith? It is the willingness of those who hear the Gospel to acknowledge that its substantive content is meant for them and then to appropriate for themselves—to trust—what it says about them. Faith is saying yes to the indicative-sentence element in the Gospel. E.g., Saying yes to “God was in Christ reconciling YOU to himself.” In one of Luther’s metaphors for faith: it is “to hang your heart” on the Good News that you have heard. That is the indicative-sentence element of the Gospel.
2. Now comes the imperative-element of the Gospel. The willingness to say yes to the Gospel’s imperative brings with it obedience. In this sense faith is obedient submission—however, not obedience to a command, but to a promise, to an “entreaty, a beseeching.” [Greek term is “paraklesis” as mentioned in #11:5 above with reference to 2 Cor. 5: “We beseech you, be reconciled to God.”] That sort of obedience shows that the Gospel has hit home in the hearer.
3. The validity, the effective power, of the Gospel for those who trust it is grounded in the heart and center of that Gospel, Christ, the incarnate Word of God. It is not “strong” faith on the part of the believer that makes faith powerful. Christ at the center of the Gospel is the power source. Gospel-believers plug into that power center. That’s why the Augsburg Confessors were so insistent on “sola fide” (faith alone, or possibly better rendered into English, “only faith”). For it is ONLY by faith, by trusting that power center—nothing else—that humans have access to that power center. This is the heart of Luther’s classic proverb: “Glaubstu, hastu. Glaubstu nicht, hastu nicht.” “When you believe, you have it. When you don’t believe, you don’t have it.” [Faith is a “having.” St. John’s Gospel often renders it that way. E.g., the very last verse in his Easter chapter 20. “These

[signs] are written so that you may BELIEVE that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that BELIEVING you might HAVE life in his name.”]

4. The criticism that all this is an illusion (for example, coming from Feuerbach) arises from observers who persist in standing outside as mere spectators. By contrast believers see themselves called out from being mere spectators. They lose their spectator position, giving up their self-lordship [“I am the master of my fate: I am the captain of my soul.”] and handing themselves over—without reservation—to their new Lord. [Remember “Lord” means “owner” in biblical vocabulary—who you belong to, “whose” you are.]

#13 The Fateful Reality of God’s Law (4)

1. The Gospel promises, and faith really is, a genuine change of existence. Before faith changes our existence, that prior existence – according to the testimony of the apostles– is “life under the law.” When the apostles use that phrase they interpret it to mean that, apart from Christ, we are ruled by the law, imprisoned by it, enslaved by it.
2. The law carries out God’s curse and wrath. In Bob Bertram’s posthumous book published earlier this year, I learned (for the first time) that Bob often talked about God’s wrath as “Sinners infuriate God.” God’s wrath is not God’s blind rage, but mega-vexation. And “curse” too is not “Burn, baby, burn in hell.” It is the opposite of “Blessing.” Both blessing and curse are statements about now—with consequences for eternity. One rendering of the Beatitudes [Matt. 5] translates the “blessed” term in each verse this way: “You are in the right place when you are poor in spirit You are in the right place when you are meek . . . when you hunger and thirst for

righteousness . . . when you are merciful . . . pure in heart . . . peacemakers . . . ” And the backup for saying that all of these are “right places” is the consequences: “When you are in this ‘right place,’ yours is the kingdom of heaven . . . you shall be comforted . . . you will inherit . . . will be filled . . . will receive mercy . . . will see God . . . will be called children of God.” The opposite “place,” the “wrong place,” is the curse-place. “You are in the wrong place when you are not poor in spirit . . . not mourning . . . not meek . . . not hungry and thirsting for righteousness . . . not merciful . . . etc.” For then none of the blessings of being in the right place come your way. “Curse” is to be missing out—possibly to be doomed to miss out forever—on all those benefits.

It is clear in Matthew’s presentation of those beatitudes—as he says at the end of chapter six—that they are predicated to those who have come in under Christ’s lordship, God’s new kingdom, the new existence mercy-regime. Christ’s kingdom, Christ’s regime brings a “rightness” that puts sinners in the “right place” with God. And from that primal “right place” all the other right places flow.

3. But not so—not yet so—for “life under the law.” That law rules human existence. It is effectively in force everywhere that Christ’s new regime is not operational. It is in charge even if it has never been spoken or written to those under its regime. God’s law is in force because God imposes it on all creation. It is not moral prescriptions. It is the reality of the givens of human existence—call it fate—the reality confronting all humankind in a fallen world.
4. It applies to all humankind without exception. It is

effectively in force—as Paul says explicitly—everywhere, even where it is unknown as God’s written law. In the opening chapters of Romans Paul makes his case that God’s law is operating full force among the Gentiles even though they never heard of Moses or Sinai in their lives. He does not say that they somehow have the ten commandments working in their societies, that these “thou shalt’s” and “thou shalt not’s” are written in their hearts. Instead he shows that what the law does when it goes to work is indeed working among the folks who never heard of Israel’s God or his commandments. He uses a Greek word usually translated into English as conscience. He doesn’t try to show what commandments might be “in” the Gentile conscience, but instead he shows how conscience works—in everybody. It functions as a judge of behavior—this was OK, this was not OK. In Paul’s words, Gentiles too have an internal evaluator at work that “accuses and excuses.” Some sense of right and wrong—even if it is not what Sinai says is right and wrong—works within them and makes its evaluations of what they do. “Though not having THE LAW, [they] are a law unto themselves.” “What law requires – namely, good behavior by whatever yardstick of measurement—is written on their hearts. And when their consciences go to work, it verifies that that yardstick is present within them. And you see it surface as they engage in accusing or excusing themselves or one another.” So God’s law—especially law as some courtroom judge somewhere giving critical evaluation, “accusing” as Paul says, (and even sentencing the guilty)—is at work throughout creation even when people don’t recognize it. Elert calls it “Verhängnis,” a fate that “hangs” over human existence after the Fall. We are “stuck” with it—unless or until some Word of God comes along to grant us a new existence. If/when such a new existence did come along, its first

trademark would be existence “free from the law.”

#14 The Concept and Dialectics of Revelation (5)

1. Gospel and law cannot be coordinated as two different phases of a historical sequence—law in olden days of the OT, Gospel since the time of Christ. Nor are they two messages that mutually supplement each other. Even though the concept “revelation” is used for both in the Bible, that dare not be understood to mean that finally they are basically the same thing, and not contradictory in what each one says and does.[Here in section #14 Elert is making his case against the opposite proposal made by Karl Barth that there is really only one message in God’s revelation. That both God’s law and God’s gospel present God’s grace offered to sinners. That though there is difference, both are “in synch” with each other. They are not contradictory at all. Barth admits that Luther claimed what Elert says, but that here Luther was mistaken. Barth’s theology was widely accepted in Europe and in North America. And still today—also among Lutherans—it has loyal followers. The ELCA text Opening the Book of Faith is solidly in Barth’s corner with its frequently repeated thesis, beginning with this on p. 2: “The Bible . . . communicates the grace of God in Jesus Christ. Grace comes to us as law and gospel, demand and promise.”]
2. God’s law, the fate we are stuck with, and the Gospel offered to us correspond to the NT testimony about a two-fold revelation, and in each of these two revelations two things are revealed. In the revelation of the law God’s wrath and human sinfulness come to light. When the Gospel is revealed, God’s grace comes to light and also the reality of faith in people trusting that grace. Paul speaks of these two revelations and the double-exposure coming from each one in no uncertain terms in Romans

1:16-18.

3. Both revelations—law and gospel—stand in a “dialectical” relationship with each other. They say opposite things about the same subjects. They are like a speech and a rebuttal which contradict each other, and yet both without a doubt are valid. What one reveals the other covers up; when one lights up, the other is darkened.
4. The paradox of this dialectical conflict finally ends in Christ, and finds its resolution in him alone. He alone could make people hear the voice of the law AND also silence it. He was the victim of the law’s order of mortality [“the wages of sin is death”] and simultaneously its conqueror. He alone could make God’s grace accessible for sinners and at the same time close off God’s wrath.
5. The paradox is resolved only for the believer, the one who has been struck by the Gospel because he previously was struck by the law.

#15 Faith’s Knowledge of God and “Natural” Knowledge of God (3)

1. The way we know God through this faith linked to God’s revelation in Christ is not to be confused with mere intellectual apprehension. Faith’s knowledge of God entails personal involvement and commitment. This amounts to a believer’s prior awareness that he has been “known” and that he is the one Christ is addressing with his Gospel call.
2. So-called “natural” knowledge of God is not to be denied, as Paul tells us in Rom. 1:19 that the Gentiles, having no contact whatsoever with God’s action among the chosen people, nevertheless “knew about God, because God had shown himself to them, ever since the creation of the earth.” Such natural knowledge is grounded in the fact that God actually does encounter us in every earthly event. Denial of such a God-encounter in every earthly

event is atheism.

3. Corresponding to such natural knowledge of God is what Paul talks about in Romans 1:18, the revelation of the wrath of God, the law's order of mortality, that sinners not only DO die, but that they MUST die. Such natural knowledge of God needs to be overcome by faith in the revelation of God's grace that comes in Christ. Christ is not an add-on to what we know about God from daily experience. That knowledge is law-knowledge, finally, the "law of sin and death." What faith "knows" about God in Christ is rescue, liberation, from law, from sin, from death.

Next time

#16 God's Way of Revealing Sinners (7)

#17 What Now Can Be Said About the Holy Scriptures (15)

P.S. The Crossings board of directors is at work to see if it can publish in some form—hard copy or cybercopy—some or all of Elert's book of dogmatics, *The Christian Faith*. An English translation exists of the whole book—all 664 pages, done years ago by Bob Bertram's father Martin, but it was never published.

Bible Reading in the ELCA

Colleagues,

On this date in the year 1930 I took my first breath of fresh air. "Farm fresh" that breath was, for I was born in the farmhouse where my Mom and Dad had started their married life

the year before. The first birthday of the Great Depression had just passed. But I didn't know that. Fact is, I grew up not even knowing there was one. I thought everyone wore hand-me-down clothes and lived from the family vegetable garden and fruit-tree orchard. All our neighbors did. Later I learned such things as Dad selling hogs for 2 cents a pound at the "yards" in Chicago, bringing the \$600 check home to hand over to "Ike" Larson, Swedish bachelor farmer (sic!), who owned our place. It was all he had pay the \$1000 annual rent. "OK, Henry," Ike said, "the rent will be \$600 this year."

My kids keep telling me I should write this stuff down. Maybe when I retire, I'll do that. But this posting is labelled Thursday Theology. Even though my natal date this year is a Thursday, it's not (yet) theology. So let's shift to that.

Every Thursday last month—there were five of them—Marie and I joined some 20 folks to read and discuss

the ELCA's recently published manual [Augsburg Fortress 2008] to promote Bible reading in the denomination. Its title: OPENING THE BOOK OF FAITH. LUTHERAN INSIGHTS FOR BIBLE STUDY. The sessions were organized by our local Lutheran School of Theology here in St. Louis.

Three weeks ago—in ThTh540—Pastor Chris Repp from across the Mississippi in Illinois had weighed that ELCA manual and found it wanting. Better said, "found it missing," namely, missing the main ingredients in the Lutheran recipe for reading the Bible. And what's so bad about that, Chris showed us, was not that we Lutherans didn't get our kudos, but that the Gospel suffers, is itself emaciated when we are told such things as: "Lutherans believe in the Bible." [No, Christ and his mercy-promise is what faith clings to.] Or again, "The Bible is a means of grace." [No, the "means,"—the actual transfer mechanisms—whereby

Christ's promise gets to people are the pipelines that Christ himself authorized. Never "The Book," but always "promise proclaimed and promise enacted in the sacraments." What Bob Bertram liked to call the "One-Gospel-and-sacraments." And the reason for "narrowing down" the grace-mediators to just ONE thing? So that the promise gets offered to people so they can trust it. Hence the Reformation watchword "faith alone"—promises work only when trusted.]

Well, we read the manual plus Chris's critique during those 5 Thursday evenings and came to the same conclusion that he did. Also at the point where "Law and Gospel" shows up. It's all over the place. But it keeps popping up as a mantra. It gets recited, yes, saluted, as a major "Lutheran insight," but then ignored (with one exception) when we are shown how to be Lutheran about Bible study. It's a shibboleth, but not a tool to be used, a key for unlocking the scriptures. Conclusion: that manual "needs work," namely, a major revision.

Dawn Engle's question at the end of the last evening's session won't go away: "Isn't anybody going to give us anything better in the ELCA than this Opening the Book of Faith?" A recent proposal in that direction sent to Augsburg Fortress, the ELCA publishing house, came back to me with a polite "Thanks, but no thanks."

So here's something that may be what Dawn was asking for. And on today's date for me it has its own nostalgia. It comes from 55 years ago. I was 22. In the summer semester of 1953 three of us young "Missouri-Synners" (Bob Schultz and Dick Baepler the other two) were at Erlangen University in Germany hearing Werner Elert's lectures on "Der christliche Glaube" (the Christian faith). For one week or so the topic was the Bible.

It was Elert's custom at the end of each lecture session to give

us summary sentences to write into our notebooks. During the lecture we were “just” supposed to listen. A few minutes before the bell rang he would “tell us what he’d told us” and say it slowly enough so we could write it down. He called them “feste Sätze” (solid sentences). In his “Der christliche Glaube” textbook—679 pages—the section on the Bible takes up 100. My “feste Sätze” from his lectures on that segment, translated into English for my own students in days gone by, are four single-spaced typed pages.

Here’s the outline:

Chapter 2: THE WHAT AND HOW OF GOD’S REVELATION

#11 The Gospel (7 Feste Stätze)

#12 Faith (4)

#13 The Fateful Character of God’s Law (4)

#14 The Concept and Dialectics of Revelation (5)

#15 Faith’s Knowledge of God and “Natural” Knowledge of God (3)

#16 God’s Way of Revealing Sinners (7)

#17 What Now Can Be Said About The Holy Scriptures (15)

Let’s see if I can give you the first 7 with a bit of context and commentary as a birthday present today. If two or three of you ask for it, I could, d.v., do more.

Peace and joy!

Ed Schroeder

#11 The Gospel

1. The “kerygma” [authorized message] of the Christian church according to the unanimous testimony of the original witnesses is called “Gospel,” a message of Good News. The connection between that kerygma and Church dogma

[teaching] is this: Dogma specifies the ingredients that must be in the message in order for it to be Gospel. The “must” (the “you gotta”) aspect of dogma is not addressed to believers: “this is what you’ve gotta believe.” Instead “dogma” is addressed to the messengers who are hustling the message: “Here’s what you’ve gotta be “messaging” if it is to come out as Christian Good News. In the ancient church there were only two dogmas—one about the Trinity, one about Christ. Trinity is the way you need to be messaging about God if it is to come out as Christian Gospel. The Christ dogma says: Here’s the way you’ve got to be messaging about Jesus of Nazareth—100% God and 100% human—in order for it to come out as Christian Gospel. Christians do not believe the dogma. They believe (trust) Christ. Dogma is addressed to the preachers and teachers. It designates what must be said for there to be a trustworthy Gospel at all.

2. The word “Gospel” is used in two ways in the NT. It is both a report (indicative sentences: “Here’s what’s happening.”) and a message personally addressed to us (imperative sentences: “Hey you, listen. This is about you!”) The indicative sentences are most frequent in the four written gospels of the NT, the “Hey you” imperatives in the apostolic epistles.
3. Concerning the indicative sentences, two items First, indicative Gospel sentences report about Jesus in such a way that the Word of God is perceptible in him. John 1 designates Christ as God’s “logos,” the Word of God. Paul in 2 Cor. 5:13 says this Word is the Word of reconciliation, God being reconciled with sinners.
4. Second, the human speech of the apostles is also called God’s Word because the person of Christ (same as above) is the substance and content of that speaking. Insofar as later proclamation—all the way down to our day—has the

same substance and content, it too can be labelled “The Word of God.”

5. Concerning the imperative sentences: The Gospel becomes imperative sentences when the report about Christ, the indicative, is applied to the hearers and readers: “Hey you . . .” With this in mind the written gospels report how Jesus himself called his hearers to come to him and listen (Matt. 11:28). When we move to the NT witness of the apostles, we see how they regularly add an appeal, a “hey you...” to their own presentation of the report about Jesus. Example: 2 Cor. 5:20. Paul reports on the “word of reconciliation,” and then adds the appeal—the “Hey you”—to the hearers: “We entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.”
 6. The imperative element expresses the fact that the substance and content of the Gospel is meant for the hearers. Its aim is to strike them, to lay claim to them. “This Gospel is talking about you.”
 7. All of the messaging coming from the apostles is the means—media, pipeline—for making the reported Christ-event audibly available. The apostles witness to the reconciliation that has happened in Christ. Their testimony does not create it. It had already happened before they came onto the scene. So the hearers are not asked to “believe” the apostles. They are entreated to trust the Christ whom the apostles tell about—in their own indicative and imperative sentences.
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Christian Buddhists? A Tale from Thailand [Part II]

[This is the second installment—the last of three letters—from Ken Dobson in Thailand. For biographical info on Ken, see last week's

posting: <https://crossings.org/thursday/2008/thur102308.shtml>]

Dobson 3

A Compelling Reason to Chant

Let's be frank, it is obvious that what Buddhists do and what they intend to do is to worship and elevate the Buddha into the highest rank of veneration. They say so quite clearly, "We reverently adore the Blessed Lord. We give highest adoration to that Blessed Lord." This confession is usually reinforced by body language that is equally unequivocal, palms of their hands together, bowing foreheads to the floor (if conditions permit) toward an image of the Buddha enthroned on a stack of tables or platforms adorned with splendid items and elaborate flower arrangements, candles and incense.

The key affirmation of the devout is a pledge of faith: "We worship and reverence the Lord Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha ... in order that benefits and happiness may come to us all to the end of time."

The primary chant is called the "Namo", the worship. It goes like this:

Na-mo ta-sa bha-ga-va-to ara-ha-to sam-ma-sam-Bu-dha-sa

The plain meaning of this mantra is, "We worship the Blessed One, Arahant, Supreme Lord Buddha."

So where is there room in this sort of veneration for a Christian excursus?

What I propose to do as I begin to participate in this type of ritual is to add a layer of understanding to the proceedings, private at first, as though I have a special insight or knowledge that is not yet understood by the rest of the people in the room. I know as I join in chanting "samma sam Buddhasa," that there is One still higher than the one we are saying is Supreme in Enlightenment. I am giving the Arahant, the self-enlightened one, his due as a teacher with supernal wisdom. And I will reserve until later a more thorough exposition of the teachings of Jesus compared to the Dharma of the Gautama. Were this understanding of Christ which I bring to my veneration of the Buddha to be widely accepted, who knows, it might have an impact on the way the chanting is done or the way the temple is outfitted, sometime down the road. But for now that is not on the horizon.

Admittedly I have to go out of my way to do this. I could stay home. I don't have to go to the funerals or the temple services. And if I go, I could just be sociable. I don't have to participate. I can just be there. Nobody will think my closed mouth is defiance. They'll think it is a sign of stupidity – well, a lack of background and training. This would wear thin as a rationale, though, before long, just as people became impatient with my stumbling attempts to speak Thai after I'd been here a while. But if I choose cultural isolation for the sake of what the Christians might think, then I will have lost one of the main values and opportunities I have in being here. No, that's not an option.

The options are two. I could take the traditional Protestant approach and find something religiously neutral to do here to warm up the community to my presence. I could teach English. The

earlier missionaries brought medicine and education. I could teach. Then I could exploit every opportunity to “share the Gospel” and “proclaim the Word.” The goal would be to start a Church out here.

The other option hasn't been seriously tried here in Thailand yet, as far as I know. That is to find a way to penetrate into the very heart of the village culture as a full-fledged participant. However, the rhythms of life in this village are orchestrated to a Buddhist tempo. The center of village life is the temple. The houses surround the temple, the fields and orchards surround the houses. To reject the temple and its role in people's lives is not only counter-cultural, it is futile. The Catholics have been here in Thailand 400 years and the Protestants nearly 200. The statistical results aren't impressive. Maybe it is time to try the second option.

Still, this sounds like I plan to be devious and hide my real agenda like the cult of Sun Yung Moon does. The Moonies don't tell new converts right away that the Rev. Moon and his wife are greater than Jesus. That surprise comes later, after the thorough indoctrination and the mass marriages. Professor Saeng of Chiang Mai University, a Buddhist philosopher and sincere critic as well as an admirer of Christian theology, has often accused Christians of similar insincerity and duplicity in their inter-religious dialogue and “studies” of Buddhism. “Your real agenda is always conversion,” he charges.

Is that my hidden agenda, too? I will guard against it. My goal is not to change Buddhists but to add to Buddhism, to fulfill it, to fill it out. Sound familiar? Not to me. I am not Messianic in my aspirations. It is the role of Christ to fulfill the Dharma. I am simply on a mission to extend care, concern and compassion to a group of people to whom God told me to minister. And they are here spread throughout these villages, installed

here by birth, functioning here in every community endeavor. If they were marginalized or a ghettoized sub-culture our campaign would be to get them into the mainstream. Praise God! We don't have to do that here. But if I am to be here for them, with them, of them, I have to join the mainstream. I will become as much a part of the mainstream as an alien like me can. I'll stick out like a sore thumb and sound like a foreigner, but I'll be here. Whatever is going on I'll be here.

What then? All right, when the chance comes I will carry the dialogue to another level. I have entry level good news: "You don't have to reject the main themes and central focus of being a Thai villager in order to accept the fact that God is, and that God can be most clearly identified in Christ Jesus with whom He is One. There is second level good news after that: after this life on earth there is life eternal in heaven, by invitation from Christ Jesus. Bringing this good news is how I may help to fulfill or expand Buddhism. There are more levels of good news. It's good news from now on. But let's settle on this first.

I think this is a personal undertaking. I neither require nor request the official church to validate or approve it. I don't even care if they know or not, although I prefer they don't make a fuss.

Nevertheless, I realize I can't have it both ways. I can't slip entirely quietly out of the Church's camp into the camp where the temple is central and expect to retain my relationship with people in my past. I can't risk the loss of the love and support of Christian colleagues, family and friends without trying to explain what I am doing from a Christian perspective. After all, this personal agenda of mine has the acrid smell of a critique (one friend called it a "trashing") of traditional Christianity and missionary strategy in which some of my friends have

invested their lives. Whereas, I no longer feel officially connected to an organized church or congregation out here, and I don't anticipate undertaking the task of trying to recruit members for one, I do value the comradeship and association with my dwindling circle of Christian friends and family. So, for them, I will try to explain.

What I imagine I am doing is somewhat apostolic, but minimalist. I think I am finally purged of triumphalism. At least I am trying to be. I have lost my crusading spirit, no longer "marching as to war." I simply want to see how little one needs to reject of this host culture and its core values in order to live as an authentic Christian in its very center.

This is a "before that" apostolic plan. In the Book of Acts as well as in very many Old Testament stories there are momentous events that resulted from God's ambassadors going to new cultural arenas. But before that, what? What was it like for the ones newly arrived into Greek lands, over into Roman Spain, out into the dangerous Caspian Sea principalities, up into the Black Forest of Germania, down into Ethiopia, over into India? They tried to set up churches, but what before that? Did they come with a full-frontal attack on the cultural traditions, folk-ways and customs? Once in a while it came to that, as with Paul the pugilist in Ephesus, but apparently not everywhere. Most of this is blank in scripture. Luke skips it until he gets to the exciting parts. But before that the Christians lived there absorbing the culture, integrating into it, being born in it, melding, changing little unless a confrontation was forced. That's my plan, to go through as much "before that" quiet living as possible. And here in this context it is going to involve chanting.

Finally, what is my rationale for chanting the "Namo"? That's really what this essay boils down to. What explanation do I give

for joining in a declaration of worship to the Buddha?

Let me begin with an application of I Corinthians 8. In this chapter Paul argues that some weak Christians will see and misunderstand if he eats food bought in the market after previously being offered to the gods in the Greek temples. In that situation all the meat in the market was first ceremoniously cycled through the temples. But he could eat it if it weren't for the fact that the new Christians might not understand and could be offended or lapse back into paganism if the line between the two lifestyles were blurred. Paul argues that the fact that the meat was offered in a temple is nullified by the fact that the gods in the temple had no effect on the meat, the gods being of no effect; from Paul's point of view, they do not exist.

If I were to substitute the phrase "chanting worship to the Buddha" for "eating food offered to idols" what would this passage say to me? Here's my edition; the italics are substitutions to fit my context, the brackets are additions to amplify the meaning. Compare it to the New Revised Standard Version of this passage.

Hence as to chanting worship to the Buddha, we know that "no idol in the world really represents God, and that "there is no God but one." Indeed, even though there may be so called gods in heaven and on earth – as in fact there are many gods and many lords – yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we live, and one Lord over all, Jesus Christ through whom are all things and through whom we have life eternal. It is not everyone, however, who has this knowledge. Since some have become so acculturated to idols [and religious symbols] until now, they think of the chanting of worship to the Buddha as offered to the highest god; and their conscience, being weak, is deceived. This chanting will not bring me close

to God. I am no worse off if I do not chant, and no better off if I do. But [I need to] take care that this liberty of [mine] does not somehow become a stumbling block for [those who see me do it]. For if others see [me] who do not understand what I am doing, chanting worship to the Buddha, might they not, since their understanding is limited be encouraged to the point of also chanting worship to the Buddha [but believing that he IS the highest god]? So by [my] doing what I do because I have a so-called deeper understanding those others for whom Christ died might be misled. This would be a great tragedy.

Paul's advice is against eating meat. He saw no compelling reason to eat meat in Corinth, fish and vegetables presumably being an option. If his advice were about chanting in temples in Corinth Paul would probably also have been against it.

But I do not see the danger of weak Christians out here lapsing out of Christian faith because of seeing my participation in temple rituals and the life of the village. There aren't any Christians out here. The ones who would take umbrage are the conservative Christians who insist their faith is strong and healthy, and they are miles away. The only ones really watching me are Buddhists and their potential for faith in Christ is in danger only if I refuse to connect with them at the religious intersection where we come together. These Buddhists aren't going to be repelled if I join in their chanting, their circumambulation of the temple on holy days, and their festivals. They aren't going to decide, "Well that's settled. There is no need to think about Jesus because Ken's a Buddhist now."

Rather it would be because I have a high regard for Buddhist culture and obviously know and care about it that people, beginning with the abbots in the temples themselves, would begin to inquire, and wouldn't back off if I were to say, "That

reminds me of a story of Jesus.” For, from my perspective, I am just about the only chance they have to hear the stories of Jesus and catch a glimpse of the living God in a universe expanded beyond countless rounds of reincarnation, completely enmeshed in a legalistic system of karma and merit.

I take this as a compelling reason to chant.

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Christian Buddhists? A Tale from Thailand [Part I]

Colleagues,

[Pre-script: You shoulduv been there. At the Crossings conference—Monday-to-Wednesday this week—just concluded. Almost too much of a High for this old man. 75 folks showed up. From far away Singapore, Indonesia and Australia (one each), and from closer (?) to home: Alaska, California, Oregon, Washington states on the Pacific rim and New York, South Carolina on the Atlantic – and umpteen places in between. The Crossings web page will soon tell you more—and I might just try to get three of the attenders to review the three Keynote presentations for you. We’ll see. But now to this week’s topic designated abov, a guest presentation from Ken Dobson.]

I met Ken Dobson years ago—previous millennium actually—over in

Alton Illinois, 30 miles north across the Mississippi from where we live. He then was pastor of the Presbyterian Church in that town. A group of Thai Christians was visiting the congregation, doing Biblical drama. Dick and Dottie Lyon invited us over to "their church" to witness the Bible "acted out" in ways we'd never imagined before.

Since then Ken has returned to Thailand to serve as a pastor to pastors, leading spiritual life retreats for clergy, for 7 years, and as Assistant to the President of Christian University of Thailand in the Bangkok area for 7 years as director of international relations and director of the Master of Arts in Teaching English as a Second Language program. He retired back to a farming village in Chiang Mai a year ago, and therein hangs the tale.

Ken recently sent me a trilogy of essays that are just too good to be kept secret. So they come to you. Numbers 1 and 2 this week, number 3 (dynamite!) next Thursday.

Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder

Dobson 1

The Labels are Falling off the Pickle Jars

What is it that defines me as a Christian in contrast, say, to my neighbors and friends out here? That's what I have been struggling with out here on the farm, in between sessions of writing books. I have certain totems, yes, the crosses hanging on three or four walls, Bibles in the book case, a woodcarving of Christ healing the lepers carved by a leper, a couple of pictures of a much younger me got up as a member of the Christian clergy. But these don't make me a Christian any more

than the mummies in the British Museum make the museum an Egyptian tomb.

Then there is the fact that our neighbors talk, think and act like Thai Buddhists. That should be convincing evidence they aren't Christian. On top of that they would reject the idea that they are Christians in any way, shape or form. Is that it? If one says, "I am a Christian" then one is a Christian? And if one says they're not, they're not?

Uh, there are large gray areas. According to a Thai government expert on religious groups there are around 2 million people in Thailand who identify themselves as Christian but only 200 thousand are on church rolls. One in ten. Are the other 9 out of 10 not Christian because they aren't Church members? The churches say so. Unless you sign up you aren't one of us, they say. We don't count you. You don't count.

It isn't that different in the USA. A Christian is a church member in some way, shape or form. But church rolls are notoriously inflated with inactive members, whatever is meant by the phrase inactive members. Here in Thailand the membership lists tend to count real members.

Well, those 9 out of 10 Thai Christians aren't performing as Christians, supposedly. One has to be part of a faith community to be part of the faith. It's even an item of theology that one is an authentic Christian only when one participates in the life and work of the Church. As a theology teacher once exclaimed, "An individual Christian is a contradiction in terms." "What if the Christian were stranded on an uninhabited island?" he was asked. "Then he should start trying to build a boat to get back to a community of the faith."

So, OK. Those 9 out of 10 are out. But then so am I.

After fifty years as a church member I'm not active in a church anymore. Not really. I am, however, as active as ever in Christian ministry. It's just that my focus group and my support base are changed. My focus group, the ones to whom I minister, aren't even nominal Christians, and wouldn't be welcome in any congregation, even if they were interested. And my support base, my community? Who comes running when I am in trouble? It's a mixed group.

Last week I was in the hospital several days. Those who came to visit were 100% family. Those who have visited after I got home: 7 members of our focus group, 3 Buddhist priests, several neighbors and family. Christian Church officials and friends? None so far. None expected now that I'll pretty much better.

I'm not whining, understand. Ok, so I am. But my circumstances have changed. My community has changed and my theology needs to change. According to my theology up to now, shared with the vast part of the Church universal, if one is a Christian one has something to do with the Church. There's no church within miles and miles of here. But the Buddhist temple is right across the rice field. Yesterday hundreds of our neighbors took highly decorated baskets of food to the temple to be distributed in a raffle. The baskets weren't sold, but the raffle was to assure that a poor family had as much chance as a rich one to have their basket being one of the fourteen chosen for the honor of being presented to a neighboring temple. This respect for the dignity of the poor was a very "Christian" idea, don't you think? I thought so. And I tried to be sensitive to other "Christian" values in that event. Everywhere I looked there were several.

For the foreseeable future, my real community has nobody who wears a Christian label. Yet they are my community, the arena of my ministry, the venue of my life, my resource for solace. If I

tried to slap a Christian label on these people because what they do is so consistent with Christian values it wouldn't stick. And for their part they have totems of their own: Buddha images, animist spirit shrines in their yards, amulets around their necks, patterns of speech, activities, and festivals shaped across millennia. They're glad to be called Buddhist. Why am I picking at their Buddhist label?

There are two reasons. First, I doubt the validity of the labels. I know a great many people who wear the Christian label who do not live or espouse Christian values. In fact, whole bunches of Christians have stuck Christian labels on things these days that aren't Christian at all – but I won't get any farther into US politics just now. And, of course, it's only fair to agree that some of my neighbors indulge in some distinctly un-Buddhist activities as well. Their label is coming unglued, too. And finally, I am labeled a Christian even though I no longer have a church to call home...well, I talked about that.

Second, I worry about the effect of the labels. At the moment there isn't a Christian-Buddhist war going on, unless you count the civil war in Burma that has been slaughtering Christian ethnic minority people for fifty years. But it would be hard to count on one's fingers and toes the number of conflicts involving us and our mono-theistic cousins in Asia, Africa and America. The situation is the worst since the Crusades, and we know who started that. Well, we don't, but no matter. We don't know who started this round either unless the 1947 United Nations Resolution to agree to the State of Israel was the beginning, with the Holocaust in Europe behind that, and the anti-Semitism of the middle ages behind that, and the crucifixion of Jesus behind that, and so on, back to Moses, or maybe Abraham, or that trouble in the Garden of Eden.

What have these labels brought us? Pickles!

So here's what I'm working on: MY WAY OF DESCRIBING GOD'S PEOPLE HAS BEEN WAY TOO LIMITED. I've got to get over the notion that the Christian label describes the contents, it just describes the jar. The brand on a jar doesn't tell much about the pickles. There are pickles just like us in jars with other labels.

Dobson 2

A Christian Buddhist Option

Fifty years ago when I stopped being a central Illinois farm boy and emigrated into the wide world, I came across a congregation of Hebrew Christians, as they called themselves. The Hebrew Christians still adhered to Jewish customs but they confessed Jesus as the Messiah. Fresh off the farm, I was overwhelmed and distracted by other encounters at the same time: Black Muslims, Waldensian Protestants, African-American Pentecostals (vast tabernacles full of them singing their souls out), Polish Catholics as strange to me as Iban converts to Methodism from cannibalism in Borneo, as well as American Jews of the type who had no traffic with the "Jesus is Messiah" crowd.

So I didn't find out what this congregation of Hebrew Christians thought about the "law and grace" great divide, or other tricky bits of theology. I only knew they were practicing Jews who were believing Christians, and they wouldn't eat bacon. I was impressed with their intensity of devotion, their dangerous and costly shift of home base, and the alienation they confessed to have experienced – all of which exceeded my experience to a factor beyond calculation. It was just the beginning for me, as it turned out. I was soon to encounter the Buddhists.

Now my friend Dr. Ed Schroeder, a classic Lutheran, draws

attention to the Hindu-Christians in Chennai, India, and similar strains of Muslim-Christians elsewhere in the world, and I am having a Gospel epiphany.

Ed wrote:

There's a growing literature—as you may already know—in missiological stuff about Christian Muslims, Christian Hindus. E.g., Chennai (old Madras) has some umpteen thousand folks who say “Jesus is my Lord (and Rama is not). I haven't just added him to the long Hindu deity list. He's the only Lord. But I eschew baptism (and thus never get rostered as a Christian) because of the catastrophe that would work in family, etc. AND remove me from any real context to be a witness to that Lord. I continue to practice the Hindu rituals, but do that under the rubrics of I Cor.7:29ff. ‘as though not’.” It's a ‘Yes, but . . . ‘ sort of Hindu ethos.”

I hear this as good news of a mind-bending type, this idea of living over the edge.

Is it time for the development of a self-conscious category of Christian-Buddhist out here in rural Chiang Mai? These Christian-Buddhists would be practicing Buddhists, participating in community festivals and temple rituals. They would accept the Buddha as the one he said he was: enlightened about the way nature is an integrated entity. But not God. The Buddha declined divinity and announced that the existence of deities was an open question outside the categories of nature about which he was enlightened. So it is theoretically possible for one to be a Buddhist and a theist at the same time. One could even be a Christian theist, for that matter, if one identified Jesus Christ with God as the Gospel of John does.

Up to now the Christians here in Thailand haven't been accepting

of the idea of Christian-Buddhists.

Oh, they snicker about the so-called “Christ-a-Buddhs.” They are the ones who won’t fish or cut bait. They can’t make up their minds to get off the fence. Most of them aren’t practicing Buddhists anymore but they aren’t ready to get wet yet. Church? Sometimes. Baptism? Not yet. To be a Thai Christian – Protestant, Catholic, Evangelical or any other kind – means first of all giving up the mantras, tokens, rituals, festivals and usually even the fellowship of Buddhists. No more active participation in temple ceremonies. It’s a cold-turkey cure. It takes a huge amount of courage to take the step into the Christian camp, and those who have risked everything to do it don’t take lightly to weaklings coming along behind.

So, as far as I know, there are no Christian-Buddhists who self-consciously are saying, “Yes, Jesus is the Son of God: He and God are One; and we are practicing the Dharma as received by the Buddha under God, and living our lives in consonance with this Buddhist community and its traditions, in loyalty to Christ.”

The Christians wouldn’t like it. And the Buddhists wouldn’t either.

One reason is that the latter day Buddhists have outdone the Gautama in professions about his divinity. They choose to overlook what he said about the irrelevance of divinities and deities, and have elevated him to the status that leaves no room at the top. If I were to try to say, as Paul did in Athens, “I want to talk about the God the Buddha didn’t talk about,” they will perhaps listen until I mention that above the Bo tree there is a heaven and in the heaven is the Supreme Being. At that point language is strained. The superlatives are already being used to talk about the Buddha, whether he wanted it that way or not.

What about my friends and neighbors and my support group, my focus group, and my colleagues in saffron robes? Are they closet Christians who know that Jesus is the Christ and the Buddha is not? No, of course not. Do they even have a strong regard for Jesus as one with the Father? Not even that. How do they compare Jesus and Gautama? No contest.

And that's the point. These people don't know Christ. They don't know anything about Christ except a few rumors, mostly scurrilous and false. They've never lived close to any Christian for whom they held any esteem. I've known for months it's time to change that. But only now do I have an active strategy. If I keep on being a Christian in spirit and lamenting my lack of a church home it's going to be a long time before anything changes. I have seen incontrovertible signs that God has been active in this country over the centuries, and is still active here. But that is a prophetic message I have for those who doubt there is anything worthwhile outside the comfort zone they call home. It's time to move beyond negative and passive strategies.

I'm going to have to become a Buddhist for the people around here to catch a glimpse of Christ.

Once I step over the line I know what to expect from the Church people. But they can't hurt me anymore. Most of the ones who have kept on being my friends up to now will remain friendly anyway.

Why then am I so glad to have brought my old acquaintance with the Hebrew Christians and Ed's brief introduction to the Chennai together with my situation out here in the Buddhist hinterland? Because now I know where what I am going to do fits into the theological tapestry.

I'm going to figure out how to be a Christian right inside this Buddhist culture. The Church has tried insisting that Christians

have to remove themselves from Buddhist culture. That is what they mean by "orthodoxy and faithfulness: exclusively Christian, without stain or taint." I won't say it hasn't worked. It is working for a couple of hundred thousand people here in this nation of 65 million. One big problem, among many, is that this being exclusive isn't, well, inclusive enough. We aren't reaching the masses this way. And I'm not passive by nature. I'm not getting any younger either. If anybody out here is going to show how to be a "God-is-in-Christ-believing-practicing-Buddhist" it is going to have to be me.

If it means memorizing some Pali chants I'll just have to do it. It can't be any more difficult than teaching those old Buddhists who become Christian to sing "A Mighty Fortress is our God."

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