

Missional God Outside the Box: Law/Promise and Congregational Vocation

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Crossings Int'l Conference, Oct. 22, 2008

Luke 10:29-33 – But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” Jesus replied, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he had compassion on him.”

Thank you for the invitation to be here. Although I have not previously been part of this Crossings community, I share your commitments to explore, as the subtitle to your conference says, “why Luther’s distinction of Law and Gospel matters more than ever.” I believe with you that it does. These matters are at the core of the Lutheran confessional calling to be missional church in our world today. David Bosch, noted missionary theologian from South Africa, suggested in a small monograph published posthumously that it will be especially important for mission in the 21st century for churches to be clear and articulate about their confessional grounding.¹ I do hope that, despite my relative unfamiliarity with the insights and complexities of the Crossings law/promise matrix, I might be able to contribute to

the conversation with the work that I'm doing both in my research and in the classroom. Specifically, I would like to suggest in this paper that the law/promise distinction motivates and shapes missional congregations to take up their vocation to be public companions with God in civil society.

We begin with the offertory prayer familiar to many of us:

*O Lord our God, maker of all things. Through your goodness you have blessed us with these gifts. With them, we offer ourselves to your service and dedicate our lives to the care and redemption of all that you have made, for the sake of him who gave himself for us. Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*²

In this prayer members of a congregation dedicate themselves to their baptismal vocations of working for the “care and redemption” of creation. So what does this mean? What does it mean to carry a cross, to live life for the neighbor? This question is addressed by us as individual “Christ-trusters,” of course, but I am also—and specifically in my research—interested in how this happens in the institutional dimension of *congregational life*. The congregation is the institutional setting in which we come to know God truly—and the congregation is where faith-formed neighbor love publicly addresses the assaults of the devil and the world. Beyond individualistic efforts, how might congregations turn their attention to the care of their communities in the face of those assaults? How might they live hospitably with God's mercy and justice among the people in their communities? How does the Spirit of God cultivate imagination and capacity within congregations for this work?

In the Crossings matrix, I believe these questions are situated in the cross-over from Stage 6 to Stage 1, as congregational vocation leads to community-expressed love for God through love

for neighbor. The offertory prayer is therefore more than a collection of individual prayers, just as congregations are more than a collection of individual believers. It is also a *congregational* prayer, in which these individuals are joined together as a community dedicating itself to a shared baptismal vocation of cross-bearing for and with the neighbor. As we know, each congregation has its own narrative, personality, and calling. Each congregation is called to unique, communally-discerned participation in the triune mission of God. This is lived out in its public life in the wider community in which God has situated it.

This essay explores what we might learn *from* congregations as congregations which are intentional about their public vocation of neighborly neighborhood love. In the first section of this essay, I will share some of the results of my own research into five newly-developed congregations who are actively developing public companionship with God in the civil society settings of their local communities. What does it take to do this work? In the second section, I would like to suggest how the distinction between law and promise serves as an interpretive framework for understanding congregations and their mission “outside the box.”

Section 1: Congregations as Public Companions with God in Civil Society

One of the all-time classic movie scenes about landing in the middle of something quite different and embarking on an adventure into a new world is from *The Wizard of Oz*. Dorothy steps out of the farmhouse after it touches down at the edge of Oz. Clutching her little dog, she says, “Toto, I have a feeling we’re not in Kansas anymore.” Just like the yellow brick road beckoning her into a marvelous new adventure, this new journey for the church, this *new era of mission*, as it has been called,

propels us forward with new imagination. The congregation lives into that future by careful discernment regarding two important questions, *"What is God doing?"* and *"What is God calling us to be and to do?"* The 21st century church of North America recognizes it is not located in Christendom, the cultural milieu in which the church enjoyed an accepted position of influence and authority, but on a mission field. With Dorothy we observe, "We're not in Kansas anymore." Only, "We're not in Christendom anymore."

There is a marvelous adventure ahead as the church re-discovers its apostolic identity centered on the mission of the Triune God. In varying ways, Christian congregations in the U.S. are discovering this mission field as they encounter folks who don't know the gospel of Jesus Christ living right across the street. New things are happening in these congregations as they move into this era of mission, including new hospitality to the stranger, changing expressions of the vocations of clergy and lay leaders, and re-envisioning of the nature and call of congregations themselves.³ God is inviting the church into a "new missional era . . . to join in this new adventure in the life of God and world, gospel, church, and culture."⁴

Gladys was the elderly, long-time treasurer of a small rural congregation. Like so many others, this congregation lamented the changes and challenges that were disrupting "business as usual." At one church council meeting, they were addressing what to do about falling attendance. One problem was the young people: they weren't showing up for worship. One person observed, "You know why they're not here on Sunday mornings? It's because they're at the bars on Saturday nights!" To which Gladys replied, "Well, then, you know what we need to do?" She paused as everyone leaned forward expectantly, eager to hear their revered matriarch chime in with her own lament. Then she challenged, "We need to get our little behinds down to the

bars!" It was clear to Gladys that the church needed to be on a mission to these young people.

The widespread use of the term *missio Dei*, referring to the mission of the Triune God in the world for the sake of the world, set the stage for understanding the missional church.⁵ Upon that stage and more congruent with the Reformers' distinction between law and promise, the twofold mission of the *missio duplex Dei* orients our Lutheran Trinitarian understanding of the emerging missional church. Asking, "What is God doing?" leads us also to the next question, "What is God calling us to be and to do?" These two basic questions, however, do not invite us to throw random answers at the wall—or into the sky.

Asking, "*What is God doing?*" and "*What is God calling us to be and to do?*" is not without theological grounding. We know something of what God is up to on the basis of Scripture and tradition, both received and lived. The law/promise tradition of the Reformation provides us a hermeneutic, a matrix, for discerning God's activity in the world on the basis of what God has done in Jesus' death and resurrection, by the power of the Spirit, for the sake of the world. Gary Simpson has written an essay which mines the riches of the Lutheran tradition for mission, provocatively titled, "A Reformation is a Terrible Thing to Waste." In it he reminds us that, amid the consumptive culture and market economies which too often shape our lives, we have been given a "promising theology" as the necessary alternative for an emerging missional church: "Only the promise *in* Christ, freshly rooted in the distinction between law and promise, firmly fastens and forever frees the missionary promise of Christ for the world."⁶

Although this might be a "new era," this is not an altogether new frontier for Lutherans. Liturgically, as evident in the offertory prayer cited above, Lutherans have prayed that their

gifts might work for “the care and redemption” of God’s world.⁷ Theologically, it has long been understood that within God’s left-hand kingdom of mercy and justice, acts of mercy (like providing food and shelter, caring for the elderly, etc.) and acts of justice (like working for equitable distribution of food and wages, peacemaking, etc.) are activities through which Christians actively participate specifically in God’s care of the creation.⁸ Practically, Lutherans have been publicly expressing the compassion of Christ in U.S. communities for decades through health and human services organizations.⁹

These commitments have not taken root in congregational life as a public vocation of congregations within their communities. Gerhard Forde clearly makes the case it should be so:

This church was not, according to the Reformers, an arrangement optional to believers in the sense that they could form a club or not according to their whims. That is why they said that the church as *institution* was ordained by God. . . . The institutional church is for the *public* proclamation of the message. It is to be *for* the world. God ordains that there be an institution for getting at the world.¹⁰

This “getting at the world” moves congregations from the comforts of privatized religion into the public sphere where they undertake the moral vocation to “bring God’s ongoing creative agency to bear on the life of our neighbors and our neighborhoods.”¹¹ As Martin Marty reminds us, congregations are places where the private and the public meet,¹² dispelling the notion that the public vocation of the congregation happens at the expense of connections to private, individual lives. Again, to Forde:

The church as institution is entrusted with the task of seeing to it that public life too is truly down to earth. To be a

Christian is to live under the sign of him who “came from heaven down to earth,” to live under the sign of his cross and resurrection, and thus to wait hopefully, patiently, on this earth by making it a better place and to challenge the world, through one’s vocation *and* the church to do the same.¹³

In this new era of mission and in the cross-over from Stage 6 to Stage 1, the church moves forward as a sailboat in uncharted waters as the Triune God innovates missional church.¹⁴ There is no *best* way to navigate these waters, but there are a myriad of courses and possibilities abound. The research that follows boards five newly-developed congregations that have set sail on this journey with an eye toward the communities in which God is planting them. They are exploring how to connect to those communities, and from their efforts and experiences have demonstrated some emerging understandings about missional congregations as public companions with God in civil society that are applicable to the development of new or the redevelopment of existing congregations. They provide a map into this promising and challenging congregational journey from Stage 6 to Stage 1, as congregations participate in God’s left-hand kingdom care of the world in their surrounding communities.

The five congregations I studied were very diverse with regard to geographical region, community classification, ethnicity, gender of the pastoral leader, age, size, and even building type in which they worshiped. The inquiry method I used was grounded theory qualitative research, which employs the varied approaches of ethnography, intensive interviews, and textual analysis to discover the components of capacity that are vital to the empowerment of these congregations for public companionship with God in civil society.¹⁵

Through careful coding of the data generated from the research visit in each congregation, a unique set of components of

capacity emerged within each congregation. These revealed important things about how God is shaping each of them for public companionship in civil society. Gary Simpson has identified four distinguishing marks of congregations that are communicatively prophetic public companions in civil society: 1) the conviction that they are participating in God's creative work; 2) compassionate commitment to other institutions and their moral predicaments; 3) critical and self-critical communicative procedures and practices; and 4) creative strengthening of moral fabrics for a life-giving and life-accountable society.¹⁶ The picture of each congregation was sharpened and focused for mission by analyzing their components of capacity in relationship to these four distinguishing marks. This process deepened our discernment and understanding of each congregation's vocation to participate as public companion with God in civil society.

When the components of capacity in all the congregations were compared with each other, a set of components of capacity were discovered to be held in common among the congregations. These help us begin to answer the question, "When reaching out to our communities, *what does it take?*"¹⁷ Through these areas of capacity, God may also lead other congregations into their unique vocations "to mend and make whole"¹⁸ among their neighbors and in their neighborhoods.

Congregations are, of course, not alone in caring about the world around them. Civil society organizations are often on the forefront of caring within communities. Civil society is defined by Gary Simpson as that "vast, spontaneously emergent, ever dynamic plurality of networks, associations, institutions, and movements for the prevention and promotion of this, that, and the other thing."¹⁹ It is the institutionalized aspect of the personal lifeworlds of culture, society, and personality which involve cultural reproduction, social integration, and

socialization, respectively.²⁰

In our Western society, the political and economic power structures tend to squash these personal lifeworlds and, according to Jürgen Habermas, it is the separation of church and state that has necessitated the development of civil society as:

a network of voluntary associations and a political culture that are sufficiently detached from class structures. . . . Civil society is expected to absorb and neutralize the unequal distribution of social positions and the power differentials resulting from them . . .²¹

Through civil society institutions, dominating forces of power and money are addressed on behalf of these lifeworlds and the pain and suffering within them. These activities may take many forms, but Gary Simpson has provocatively summarized them as “sleuthing” (like a bloodhound) and “sluicing” (like an engineer building irrigation canals).²² It is partnership with these institutions in sleuthing and sluicing that deepens congregational engagement in civil society.

An arrow indicates our move from Stage 6 to Stage 1. We are new creations freed in Christ, and we live in the world by the power of the Holy Spirit, bearing Christ amid the assaults of the devil and the world by bearing love to our neighbors and neighborhoods. Placing the churchly vocation of congregational public companionship within the context of other civil society organizations provides a broader perspective within which congregations might more fully and creatively explore the possibilities and potential in this vocation. Here we are assisted through research conducted by the Center for Civil Society Studies (CCSS) of Johns Hopkins University Institute for Policy Studies. As a result of comparative studies among civil society organizations in over fifty countries, the CCSS has

proposed five hypothesized contributions which civil society organizations might make in their communities: 1) service, 2) innovation, 3) advocacy, 4) values guardianship, and 5) community-building.²³

In my research, the CCSS hypothesized contributions were used to further analyze the components of capacity exhibited by the congregations, and they demonstrated differing ranges of possibility along that spectrum of opportunities. These potential contributions, seen within the framework of civil society organizations in general, not only provide congregations with visions of new possibilities for direct community involvement but also new possibilities for partnering with other civil society organizations. Participation in God's Trinitarian care of the world is rich and full of potential. The arrow from Stage 6 to Stage 1 is neither singular nor focused in just one direction, but bursts like fireworks into multiple avenues of expression for congregations within their communities. We are embarking upon many yellow brick roads as public companions with God in civil society!

Section 2: Law/Promise Congregational Understanding

In this second section, I would like to suggest how the distinction between law and promise serves as an interpretive framework for understanding congregations as they pursue their mission "outside the box." *The law/promise framework helps us participate in God's renewal of the church today for mission.* Too many congregational leaders look for keys, fill out diagnostic surveys, seek purpose-driven advice, and generally run after the gods of secular wisdom in search of congregational renewal. Congregational renewal is God's business—it is the dedicated task of the *missio duplex Dei*.²⁴ The law/promise

conversation re-orientes our shared life within the life of the Trinity.

I've been focusing on one small section of the law/promise matrix: that move from being rescued in Christ, to living life for the neighbor. My daughter, who was miraculously spared her life in a horrific car accident, now believes more profoundly than ever in God's miraculous grace—and lives with a humble, determined enthusiasm for sharing that good news with others. Being rescued can do that to us; it re-orders priorities, heightens commitments, and motivates. As one of my students wrote:

This is the way in which law and gospel most harmoniously work together. In the place where God has provided for and freed the Christian through his promise of redemption, the Christian is called immediately back to serve his neighbor, that his neighbor might also experience God's goodness in creation.

Or, as another student said so succinctly, "If we are renewed and by our renewal renew our neighbor, is that not the kingdom of heaven?"

In this second section, I invite us to reflect on some of the ways this law/promise matrix addresses our callings and our challenges in congregational life – and why the distinction matters now as much as ever. I will quickly mention five that occur to me, for starters.

First, the law and promise distinction reminds us that congregations, like individuals, need to be **renewed daily** in the covenants which God has made with them. As each day we arise to our congregational life, we need to corporately claim that baptismal promise that, as Simpson says, "firmly fastens and forever frees" us as the church as well as individuals. To do so requires that our congregations find corporate ways to engage in

that continual movement within the law/promise matrix. In a recent visit to Luther Seminary, ELCA Bishop Mark Hanson noted the need for *corporate* confession by the church as he recalled placing his hands upon the wall between Israel and Palestine in a liturgical act of repentance on behalf of all of us. Similarly, we might ask what corporate acts of baptismal repentance might be appropriately enacted within our local communities.

Second, it gives us ***purpose***. We have been given our purpose in our baptisms. Lack of purpose and general dissatisfaction in congregations are not the *symptoms* of our problem but are at the core of our problem itself. We need not diagnose *them*, but they are the law diagnosing *us* and our need for the redemption and transformation, forgiveness and renewal through Christ's death and resurrection by the power of the Spirit. I believe the arrow that propels us from Stage 6 to Stage 1 provides exactly the purpose our congregations need: it's our neighbor's need. Our purpose is for Christ to be central in our congregations – to be received, claimed, and lived in the community Christ died to save – and then borne to the neighbor and shared with the neighbor. Surely this is one place where we have tended to “hoard Christ,” as Simpson would say, and become enclosed upon ourselves in congregational busy-ness. It is our enclosed centrality that keeps us from taking up the cross of our neighbors, particularly those at the margins and in deepest need. Like the elder brother in the parable of the lost son, the “regular members” in our congregations can claim every bit of time pastors and other congregational leaders are able to give – and always more. It then becomes difficult to be the congregations Patrick Keifert suggests we should be, whose eschatological imagination is for those who are not yet there—or have not yet returned.²⁵ Moving within the diagnosis and prognosis of the law and the promise forever directs us to our

neighbor, both as individuals and as congregations.

Third, I believe that God working through the law/promise distinction **frees** our congregations. God frees us from congregational lethargy or that vague disinterest that makes travelling soccer or relaxation at Starbuck's more inviting than worship on a Sunday morning. Remember Luther's famous words from "The Freedom of a Christian," "A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all."²⁶ We can do nothing to earn our salvation—so we've got 100% of our time on our hands, and that time has a name on it: our neighbor. The law/promise distinction ties our work daily to our own need for the Savior, to justification by faith alone, so that we can truly be freed for the neighbor.

Fourth, the law/promise **mobilizes and energizes** us. This is where we Lutherans tie ourselves in knots. Should we be nervous about being energetic in our freedom? To use St. Paul's words, "μη γενοιτο"—by no means! That would be living under the law so that grace could abound! Some of the congregations in my research were beehives of activity, so I was asked if they were just a bunch of practical atheists—you know, "praying as if it all depended upon God, and working as if it all depended upon themselves." I believe they were not. One of them is in one of the most dangerous cities in the United States, but they take on the drug dealers and the crime and the poverty because they've found new life and deep joy in Christ, and can't help but share it.

Walking around the neighborhood distributing flyers with the pastor developer of Banquet of Praise, a young teen went right up to a drug dealer on the streets and said, "I'm walking with my pastor. Would you like to come to church? We're having a service next Saturday."

*The man said, "You wouldn't want me to come to your church."
The youth replied, "Why not? You're a child of God. That's what my pastor says. Here's a pamphlet."
The man looked the pastor straight in the eye, "Are you sure you'd want me to come to church?"
She replied, "Yes. Jesus loves you." And the man began to cry.*

Given the daunting challenges of life in this community, this new congregation could easily become a gathering of such "practical atheists," themselves carrying the weight and burden of the pain they feel called to address. But they see it as a necessary part of their faith in Christ, who carries *them* as well as those they reach. As one person said, "The faith element tells us that we can persevere not because the power is ours but by the power of the Holy Spirit in us we are able to keep on moving. Not that we will ever make heaven on earth, but we can make it a whole lot better than it is." They do what they do because, in that impoverished, crime-riddled community, you can't *preach* the gospel without *being* the gospel for the neighbor. As another person said, "In this community, everyone is so poor that it would be absolutely ludicrous to try and have a church that wasn't trying to reach out into the community. There's no way to do it."

And, in faith, they count it all joy. They *want* to be down at City Hall, lobbying at the state capital for zoning changes, staying up late to make sure the corner convenience store is safe, and canvassing the neighborhood to invite drug dealers to church. They have received joy in Christ, in spite of their circumstances. This is abundant life for congregations.

Fifth, the law/promise matrix necessitates that we ***understand*** our communities so that we might discern both the assaults of the devil and the world, and God's saving action as well. It provides for faithful use of the wealth of insight available to

us through sociological and demographic tools. As one student said, "To make the gospel message heard in our context, we must first of all acknowledge our context using demographical and sociological tools." We need leaders that can "read the audiences" and understand our culture, but more than that, we need leaders that can think theologically about this world around them. Teaching students to view the sociological data through the law/promise lens is already making a difference as students go out in groups to study congregations. One student made my day when she wrote and now, as I read it, it reminds me of the title of this conference: "getting honest . . ."

For the congregation s who discern to move into the future, the use of sociological and demographic tools put in a framework of Law-Promise is a helpful, healthy, and hopeful method to work with. What became clear was the paramount difference between the pure work of a sociologist or demographer and that of a theologian who used the tools of sociologists and demographers. It brings the congregation to recognize their need for death, for they have failed. Done with the utmost care and nurture, sociological studies can allow the congregation to be honest with itself. The promise of Christ claims the dead congregation and the Holy Spirit raises it to new life and new identity in Christ.

There's much more to be mined in the riches of law/promise on God's mission field here in North America. Perhaps I've gotten our imaginations stirring. After finishing the project of researching congregations, one student summed up our task like this: "As a future leader within the ELCA, part of what I believe will be my job is to understand the dynamic relationship between law and promise and what that means for a given congregation."

I would like to conclude by commenting on the title to my talk,

“Missional God Outside the Box.” That phrase (“outside the box”) was, in fact, the phrase commonly used by the research congregations in referring to themselves. Mission pushes congregations to go “outside”—beyond usual norms and perimeters which have become like boundaries difficult to cross. In the cross-over from Stage 6 to Stage 1, congregations just may find themselves outside usual patterns *and* outside their doors and into the streets, i.e., “outside the box.” But my title does not refer to congregations; it refers to God “outside the box.” We go because God is already there—our missional God is already “outside the box”—and by faith alone, may we participate with God there.

*The Church of Christ in every age,
Beset by change, but Spirit-led,
Must claim and test its heritage
And keep on rising from the dead.*

*Across the world, across the street,
The victims of injustice cry
For shelter and for bread to eat,
And never live before they die.*

*Then let the servant church arise,
A caring church that longs to be
A partner in Christ’s sacrifice,
And clothed in Christ’s humanity.*

*We have no mission but to serve
In full obedience to our Lord;
To care for all, without reserve,
And spread God’s liberating Word.*

References:

1 David J. Bosch, *Believing in the Future: Toward a Missiology*

of Western Culture (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 1995), 44.

2 Inter-Lutheran Commission on Worship, *Lutheran Book of Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House; Philadelphia: Board of Publication, Lutheran church in America, 1978), 69.

3 See Patrick R. Keifert, *Welcoming the Stranger : A Public Theology of Worship and Evangelism* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), Craig Van Gelder, *The Essence of the Church: A Community Created by the Spirit* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2000).

4 Patrick R. Keifert, *We Are Here Now: A New Missional Era: A Missional Journey of Spiritual Discovery* (Eagle, ID: Allelon Publishing, 2006), 36-37.

5 David Jacobus Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 389-93.

6 Gary Simpson, "A Reformation is a Terrible Thing to Waste: A Promising Theology for an Emerging Missional Church" in *Missional Church in Context: Helping Congregations Develop Contextual Ministry*, ed. Craig Van Gelder (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmanns, 2007), 67.

7 *LBW*, 69.

8 Psalm 101, in *LW* 13:146. For Martin Luther's understanding of God's left-hand kingdom of mercy and justice, see his commentary on Ps. 101.

9 Over 300 Lutheran health and human services now comprise Lutheran Services in America (LSA), the largest nonprofit in the U.S. by a significant margin. See <http://www.lutheranservices.org>.

10 Gerhard O. Forde, *Where God Meets Man: Luther's Down-to-Earth*

Approach to the Gospel (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House, 1972), 127.

11 Gary M. Simpson, "Toward a Lutheran 'Delight in the Law of the Lord': Church and State in the Context of Civil Society," in *Church and State: Lutheran Perspectives*, ed. John R. Stumme and Robert W. Tuttle (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2003), 48.

12 See Martin E. Marty, "Public and Private: Congregation as Meeting Place," in *American Congregations*, vol. 2, *New Perspective in the Study of Congregations*, ed. James P. Wind and James W. Lewis (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1994) 133-166.

13 Forde, 128.

14 Keifert, *We Are Here Now: A New Missional Era: A Missional Journey of Spiritual Discovery*, 50-51.

15 The following four Aristotelian categories are the components of capacity created by Church Innovations for their Congregational Discovery consulting process: knowledge base, skills, attitudes and beliefs, and transferable habits. See <http://www.churchinnovations.org>. For an instructive example of how these components of capacity are utilized in congregational studies by Church Innovations, see Pat Taylor Ellison, "Doing Faith-Based Conversation," in *Testing the Spirit: Theological Reflection for Mission in Congregational Studies, 2004*, ed. Patrick Keifert (Grand Rapids: Eerdmanns, 2005, forthcoming). These components of capacity have been edited as follows to focus on community participation in this particular study of congregational public companionship with God in civil society: knowledge, skills, attitudes and beliefs, and associative habits.

16 Simpson, *Critical Social Theory: Prophetic Reason, Civil Society, and Christian Imagination*, 144-45.

17 These five congregations had the following components of capacity: 1) their *knowledge* of the community poor and of local politics is basic to their community engagement; 2) they have developed *skills* for helping in the community, innovating new solutions to problems, and adapting readily to changing circumstances while maintaining shared congregational priorities; 3) they share an *attitude* for thinking outside the box and the *belief* that the church exists to care for others, including those outside the congregation; and 4) they demonstrate *associative habits* of partnering with other organizations, practicing neighborliness, and functioning as a community church.

18 Gary Simpson et al., *Living Out Our Callings in the Community* (St. Paul, MN: Centered Life, 2006), 17.

19 Ibid., 12.

20 Gary M. Simpson, *Critical Social Theory: Prophetic Reason, Civil Society, and Christian Imagination* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2002), 108.

21 Jürgen Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), 175.

22 Simpson, *Living Out Our Callings*, 16-18.

23 Lester M Salamon, Leslie C. Hems, and Kathryn Chinnock, "The Nonprofit Sector: For What and for Whom?," in *Working Papers of the Johns Hopkins Comparative Nonprofit Sector Project* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins Center for Civil Society Studies, 2000).

24 Simpson, "A Reformation Is a Terrible Thing to Waste: A Promising Theology for an Emerging Missional Church," 68-70.

25 See Patrick Keifert, "The Trinity and Congregational Planning: Between Historical Minimum and Eschatological Maximum," *Word & World* 15, no. 3 (1998), 282-290.

26 LW 31:344.

[MissionalGodOutsideBox \(PDF\)](#)

America's God: YHWH, Baal, or Golden Calf?

Frederick Niedner

Crossings Conference, St. Louis, MO, 21 October 2008

Who Do You Say "I Am": Getting Honest about God Today

Crossings Second International Conference

St. Louis, MO, October 19-22, 2008

I'm grateful to be with this group of Crossings friends and colleagues once again. Exemplars like Walter Bouman taught some of us the importance of opening conference talks with humor, so I usually begin that way. I wasn't sure I needed any this time, thinking that perhaps my title alone was sufficiently curious. Moreover, connecting religion and the nation or politics gives us either too much or too little to laugh about today. In a political season, we learn the real problem with political jokes. Too many of them get elected.

It also occurred to me that the whole question my presentation addresses is moot. When Garrison Keillor visited Muncie, IN, a

few years ago in order to broadcast his *Prairie Home Companion* show from there, he asserted that all of Indiana struck him as Lutheran. I think he really meant to describe the entire Midwest. Everyone is Lutheran, he said. Even the atheists. It's the Lutheran God they don't believe in.

In any case, a preliminary word on the history of my title. Cathy Lessmann, for the planning committee, suggested, "Is America's God More Yahweh or More Baal?" That gave me a bit of pause. I wondered if folks would think that I'd found it necessary to take up some kind of dialogue with an old 'classic' in the history of churchly affairs that led, oddly enough, to moments and meetings such as this. Back in 1965, Herman J. Otten, the Bishop of New Haven, published a book titled *Baal or God*. [Question: If there had been no Herman Otten, what would Lutheranism look like today? Would there be conferences such as this one on Law, Gospel, and *theologia crucis* these days? And if so, on what campus(es) would they be held? On Catholic ones such as this? Or at Lutheran venues, like the seminary campus just across the river?]

The introduction to Otten's volume quotes a 1924 issue of the *Christian Century* (without attribution of author) as saying, "Christianity according to fundamentalism is one religion and Christianity according to modernism is another. . .there is a clash here as profound and grim as between Christianity and Confucianism. The God of the fundamentalist is one God, the God of the modernist another." For Otten, fundamentalism represents "historic Christianity," while modernist Christianity (elsewhere termed "liberalism" in the introduction as well as the rest of the volume) is to fundamentalism what Baal worship was to the worship of the true God.

I would assert that neither fundamentalism nor modernism is authentic, catholic, apostolic Christianity. My assignment,

however, is not to dialogue with Herman Otten, at least not directly, but to get honest about God, and to ask of America, "Who do you say I am?" And to do that, I felt it necessary to add a third possibility besides YHWH or Baal. Hence, "Golden Calf" is part of the title. The reason will hopefully become clear later on.

I'm usually wrong about things, and I don't expect this occasion to be an exception. Thus, I aim to generate discussion with a few debatable hypotheses about American popular religion, and I lay no claim to having the last word. The most likely value in the conversation has to do with how we diagnose our own and our congregations' condition as we preach and teach law and gospel.

We could begin with a quick overview of "civil religion," which has been part of the discussion of western culture(s) ever since Rousseau's *Social Contract* and its assertion that while keeping church and state separate is necessary, a truly healthy and functional society nevertheless requires a contract among citizens that in effect asks for a kind of religious commitment and a level of devotion.

Robert Bellah has described the American version of the Social Contract as follows:¹

. . . [A]ny coherent and viable society rests on a common set of moral understandings about good and bad, right and wrong, in the realm of individual and social action. It is almost as widely held that these common moral understandings must also in turn rest upon a common set of religious understandings that provide a picture of the universe in terms of which the moral understandings make sense. Such moral and religious understandings produce both a basic cultural legitimization for a society which is viewed as at least approximately in accord with them, and a standard of judgment for the criticism

of a society that is seen as deviating too far from them.

Ben Franklin, in his autobiography, gave voice to his version of such moral and religious understanding:²

I never was without some religious principles. I never doubted, for instance, the existence of the Deity; that he made the world, and govern'd it by his Providence; that the most acceptable service of God was the doing of good to man; that our souls are immortal; and that all crime will be punished, and virtues rewarded, either here or hereafter. These I esteem'd the essentials of every religion.

This plays out, as at least one of Bellah's interpreters suggests, in the following way:³

American civil religion is not what we believe in our heart of hearts about the destiny of our immortal souls. It is, rather, the beliefs we share with our fellow citizens about our national purpose and about the destiny of our national enterprise. Vague and visceral it may be, but there is an American creed, and to be an American is to believe the creed. America is, in this sense, a religious venture.

What is that creed?

Much of America, of course, says we are a Christian nation, not merely a generically religious, more or less Unitarian Universalist collection of believers in the social contract. All manner of folks, from the prominent and the often quoted to ordinary voters, including one of my brothers with whom I have occasional debates, believe that this country was founded on "conservative Christian principles." But that never gets translated out to mean anything that most of us would recognize as authentically Christian, but rather as some form or another of nominally christened but nevertheless generic *opinio legis*.

In this common, public view, what makes us Christian is that we're right in conduct and ideology, while others are wrong. God, Jesus, and America are all wrapped up in a kind of secular trinity.

Lamin Sanneh, professor of World Christianity at Yale, lectured at Valparaiso University last week and characterized Americans' peculiar version of Christianity as a type that believes:

- All will eventually come out well – i.e., we have a kind of collective, realized eschatology that's almost uniquely optimistic among nations of the world where Christians exist in significant numbers.
- Christianity is prosperity oriented. We get something for being Christian. We prosper, specifically as a consequence of being Christian. God looks favorably upon us, and we're better off than others who don't believe as we do. Health and well-being are assumed benefits of repentance and faith.
- We are convinced of our own innocence. Indeed, America in general is convinced of its innocence. Not in the sense of naïve—though in so many ways we're that. But in sense of being well-intentioned, and to some extent also in the sense of being guiltless. Listen to our rhetoric about our wars. We are the *good* guys!! Even when we start a war, we're merely trying to help those others who live without freedom.

There are obvious ways to critique these things.

- Mark's audience would have been very surprised to learn that faith and faithfulness were supposed to get you a happy life. "Take up your cross and follow me!" doesn't exactly sound like the prosperity gospel.
- That anyone anywhere is innocent flies in the face of Lutheran anthropology—and the Bible's. Perhaps Christ only

needed to die for the folks in other nations, and for the gays and abortionists in our own country. The rest of us are home free.

As has been well-documented for decades, this attitude tends to view the United States as a “new Israel,” a chosen people, ensconced in the Promised Land, a land from which God drove not the Amorites, Hittites, Moabites, Jebusites, etc., but the Arapaho, the Cherokee, the Lakota, and the Hopi peoples, among many others.

Here’s a current piece of that kind of thinking that came in a prayer I received recently from the American Bible Society’s listserv:

Restoration of our Economy

Lord, our Father, may Your everlasting strength and resolve help solidify and bring together Your Nation of devoted followers to work toward uplifting the economy. We pray for You to forgive foreclosures, for the Nation’s dollar to be strong in value once again, and for the government to make wise and Godly decisions with the country’s national resources. Let us pray to You, oh Lord, to provide relief to those impoverished and in dire need; and for those of us with wealth and abundance to increase our charity and support as we were taught through Your divine teachings. Amen.

It’s not merely old-fashioned conservatives and purveyors of modern-day Manifest Destiny ideology, including the current administration that sees itself as doing God’s will in Iraq and elsewhere who think this way, but also folks like Jeremiah Wright, whose notorious “God damn America!” sermon played a temporary role in the current political campaign. Wright’s theology makes little sense apart from a notion that America is a special people whom God watches closely so as to reward and

punish in accord with our obedience or disobedience to God's laws as articulated in some covenant arrangement we have with God.

The God of Wright's America is a version of YHWH as understood by the prophetic and early Deuteronomic traditions of the Hebrew Scriptures. That God calls a people to eschew all other gods and to demonstrate covenant faithfulness by, in the words of Micah 6:8, "doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with God." When we fail at that, we fall under judgment, but not just any judgment. We come under the more exacting judgment God reserves for the elect. "You only have I known of all the peoples of the earth," says YHWH in Amos 3:2f. "Therefore, I will punish you for all your iniquities." We must choose between life and death, blessings and curses. When we obey, we're blessed. When we disobey, we're cursed.

It's usually left to modern, often self-proclaimed prophets to match the sins of the people with the punishments as they occur, that is, to examine God's smitings and to discern just what sins they were meant to punish. E.g., Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson famously identified America's toleration of homosexuals as the occasion for some of our punishments, including the awful one we call "9-11."

Since not all in this country are members of Christian or Jewish churches, synagogues, or traditions, this is only part of the population's answer to the question, "Whom do you say that I am, America?" From the majority perspective, however, the Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, and Unitarian Universalists among us may have a different set of religious convictions related to nation and politics, but they hardly count. Those "others" among us are generally viewed like the guests and sojourners of the Hebrew Bible. They pay taxes, etc., but they're not really "us," and we don't let them touch the good china.

When the sojourners begin to act too much like they belong to this chosen people, too, many among us quickly respond like dogs and cats who must mark their territory by urinating on the corners of their turn. This we do by putting the Ten Commandments in the courthouse and Nativity scenes on the lawn in front of city hall, or even better, having a celebrity sing "God Bless America" during the seventh-inning stretch at our ball games. Or in my state, by putting "In God we Trust" on our license plates, next to an image of a rippling, American flag.

But this latter manifestation, the anti-sojourner, turf-marking version of American Christianity, isn't so much a prophetic/Deuteronomic equivalent of ancient Israel's devotions to God, but rather a version of the monarchic covenant arrangement. This we see promulgated in scriptures by Nathan, David, Solomon, and the shapers of the Ark and Succession Narratives. This land and this throne are our divinely given heritage and right, and God's chosen one, the "messiah," acts for and on behalf of God to protect and preserve Israel and to subdue God's (our) enemies. God will punish us with the rod of men if we err, but will not take away the kingdom from us (2 Samuel 7).

When the kingdom was finally lost in 587 BCE, and both the prophetic/Deuteronomic and David/Zion theologies came crashing down in the wake of Josiah's reforms (the most faithful king in YHWH eyes of anyone else, ever, says 2 Kings 23), the prophetic tradition ultimately blamed the kings, although not Josiah, but his grandfather, Manasseh (also 2 Kings 23). I can't help but notice that at this moment in our national history, the prophets among us are still blaming the kings. The financial crisis results from the errors in leadership during the _____ administration, they say. Some fill in that blank with Reagan, some name Clinton, others say Bush II. But it's surely one of them, and not the rest of us!

And so it is, as one pundit put it on the day the Big Bail-Out finally passed, that democratic capitalism celebrated the 160th anniversary of the publication of the Communist Manifesto by dropping dead in its tracks.

I don't believe, of course, that YHWH is really the deity we fear, love, and trust in either of these forms of nationalistic American pseudo-Christianity, but I'll say more on that later. Who is the actual or functional deity whom today's prophets hold over our heads and whom the monarchists venerate as they pee on the corners of our national lawn? I'll return to that question momentarily.

There's another deity to account for, a hard one to name. It's the one who inspires great zeal among those who work tirelessly to stop abortions and to keep gay and lesbian people from having committed relationships that are protected rather than condemned, granted property and inheritance rights rather than being consigned to closets and celibate isolation. I'll not presume to describe everyone in these camps, but in my view these activists are in general a single camp, and their common concern is with other people's sex lives. We mostly obsess on other people's sins when we're trying to ignore or run from the mess of our own, I would argue. And the god we serve in this zealous work is the one who will tell us we're right and give us a privileged position, and who will most surely condemn those others who aren't right, clean, or acceptable. This is the same deity who promises the dominant party in each of the great polarities among humankind—race, class, and gender, otherwise known as Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female (Gal. 3:28)—that they rightfully own and can keep their privileged positions.

Though I'll not yet name this deity, he/she/it is a near cousin of the Davidic dynasty's divine patron and comes from the same

gene pool as the Deuteronomist's deity as well. But none of these is the God whose gospel we come to know and trust in Jesus Christ.

If there were folks going around today saying Allah or Krishna was America's god, I would have to talk about whether or not such a claim could be true. Some day we may, but so far we don't have to address such claims.

There is another deity to whom America bends the knee, nearly every moment of every day, and in the past few weeks we done so with zealous, fear-filled, passion. I speak of THE MARKET. Have you noticed in the headlines and on the business pages of late how much of our talk is about faith, trust, confidence, and even forgiveness, resurrection, and new life? And none of this is ostensibly religious talk, but discussion of our relationship to THE MARKET, and THE MARKET's recent treatment of such things as our retirement programs, taxes, health systems, and in general our way of life?

We have come to talk like Job, with a twist: "THE MARKET giveth, and THE MARKET taketh away. Blessed be the Name of THE MARKET." More and more, economists and financial experts, who once we called social scientists, sound like theologians who ponder mysteries and mythologies, and not much like scientists who report on empirical data.

Current orthodoxy worships THE MARKET as the mighty giver of all things. If we remain patient, THE MARKET will care for us and see to all our needs. Only a few months ago, economic difficulties left us dangling over an abyss too blasphemous to name—Recession! But no, THE MARKET's prophets told us, those tremors were merely one of THE MARKET's occasional "self-corrections." Think, perhaps, of God having the hiccups, or Zeus swearing off nectar and ambrosia and sticking to bread and water

for a spell.

Now, however, THE MARKET has not merely burped, but turned on us and cursed us for our iniquities—greed in high places, prideful over-reaching, and arcane sins such as selling derivatives. Now we must wait until THE MARKET hears our confessions, accepts our repentance, lifts us up, sets our feet upon a rock, and restores our fortunes. Especially our Roth IRA's.

THE MARKET calls prophets who instruct us and ordains priests to mediate between itself and mere mortals. The law of self-correction is among the revelations prophets have brought down from the mountain. Another divine disclosure apparently confirms that while individual or family indebtedness remains a recipe for disaster, an enormous national debt shouldn't worry us. Indeed, we should see it as proof of our leaders' faithful devotion. THE MARKET will absorb the debt, or so the prophets promise.

The chair of the Federal Reserve board serves as THE MARKET's great high priest. Periodically, this individual performs the rites of Interest Rate Adjustment. Most often THE MARKET, along with *cherubim* and *seraphim* on Wall Street, declare all of this very, very good. (Alas, for the moment, even the *cherubim* and *seraphim* have fallen. Only THE MARKET remains.)

A few months ago, faithful priests who serve THE MARKET ordained that most everyone in the country should get \$600 along with a letter asking folks to spend it quickly. This will "stimulate the economy," or, in other words, wake up THE MARKET. Lest you think falling asleep sounds less than godly, be assured that priests have always had the job of rousing gods from languor and inattention. Long ago, sacrificing a few goats usually did the trick, but nothing remains so simple today.

Now, however, we have had to kill not only the goat, but our

firstborn children, so to speak. Our sacrifice will be worth \$700 billion, just for starters. I cannot count the zeroes.

Like competing religious traditions, THE MARKET has different kinds of devotees. Rival economic theologies vie for power and ascendancy. Prophets and priests of “supply side economics,” who see themselves as reformers and purifiers, have succeeded of late in preaching down the “demand side economics” of the venerable British prophet, John Maynard Keynes. As in all other struggles, rancor and name-calling break out occasionally. No less a figure than George Bush 1.0 once called Ronald Reagan’s supply-side gospel “voodoo economics.” Bush lost, of course, and some say he eventually drank the Reaganomics Kool-Aid. Nevertheless, his epithet against the Great Communicator remains in the theological lexicon.

How do the rest of us cope with all this? For better or worse, in this area of life, we can’t so easily choose our own theology and shrine. One sect or the other gets to practice its orthodoxy on all of us. Ours is not to reason why, etc.

So long as we remember that THE MARKET cannot ultimately save us from ourselves or from anything else, we can probably trust that THE MARKET isn’t smart or wise enough to destroy us, either. These days, however, it’s safest to keep such talk at a whisper.

There are some other, really serious corollaries to this MARKET religion. It has pervaded everything in our culture, including the church. (For some of this, I have followed a 1999 Harvey Cox article, “The Market as God,” in *The Atlantic Monthly*.) It’s not just my university that now has a “marketing plan,” but we can all witness the church and its new, market-driven behaviors. Market wisdom is now behind the spread and growth of churches. It dictates music as well as other elements of worship style, and it also gets used to determine the content and tone of

proclamation. We have different messages for different clienteles. ("Hold the pickles, hold the lettuce, cross-less sermons don't upset us. . .Have it your way!")

But is THE MARKET really God? I think not. It's another lie we tell ourselves. It gives us permission to say that there's nothing we can do, for example, about this or that failure to stand up for our so- called convictions. "Not me, God, but THE MARKET made me do it. . ."

I think, actually, that THE MARKET is today's equivalent of Baal, and devotion to THE MARKET like the "fertility religion" of the Canaanites. That religion invited humankind to live within the world conceived by the myth of El and his brood, Baal, Asherah, Nahar, Yam and Mot, the deities who embodied the forces of nature that one needed to know about and dance with if one expected to succeed as a farmer. If you don't understand the rhythms of the seasons and the activities of Baal and Asherah, just as if you don't know the laws of supply and demand or the rhythms of THE MARKET, you will fail miserably and perhaps even die.

But THE MARKET isn't God any more than the seasons of the year or the forces of nature are God. This is idolatry, mistaking the creature for the creator.

As for the deities truly active in American versions of Deuteronomic, prophetic, and monarchic theology, they're the gods of our own making that prove us right, while others are wrong. They're finally gods who serve us, not we them. I say this next piece of diagnostic sarcasm everywhere these days, but pardon my pointing out once again that this business of being right about everything is our greatest need, despite what Maslow and others have taught. Even more than security, warmth, food, water—yea verily, even more than sex, we want to be right and to

be proven to our detractors as right. If you doubt this, try an experiment. Get married. Sometimes joining a church will work, too. These are marvelous laboratories for testing one's need to be right about everything. Even little things.

What we really have here, in all cases, I believe, are a collection of golden calves. I can't go too deeply into Exodus 32, and its obvious link to the actions of Jeroboam, a critic of Davidic abuse of Israel's theology, who according to 1 Kings 12 substituted golden calves in Bethel and Dan for legitimate worship of YHWH at Jerusalem's temple. What he really did was to set up cherubim at Bethel in the south, and Dan in the north, and to make of his whole nation the throne of YHWH—a holy ark! (Think about it. Would you worship cows if you lost a church fight, and thus got cut off from the sanctuary and the place you were baptized?)

But Exodus 32 puts those golden calves into a story of Israel's attempts to move into a future in the absence of YHWH, or at least of YHWH's servant Moses. The people needed a new symbol of YHWH's presence, so they made *cherubim*. So far so good. I'm not even sure the big party and all the dancing were so bad, though Exodus sure thinks God and Moses were ticked over all this. The real travesty happens later in the story, when Moses confronts Aaron over the whole thing. Aaron had asked for all the people's gold, and he'd melted it and made the *cherub*. But when confronted by Moses, he pleads ignorance. "Gosh, Moses, I just don't know how to explain it. The people started giving me all their gold, I threw it in the fire, and this calf jumped out!!!"

We make idols, then we attribute life to them, and finally we serve them, in part by providing them a life-giving story, conveniently forgetting that we made them. (All the anti-idol poems of the exilic Isaiah apply here.) In one way, I'm suggesting that there is no such thing as THE MARKET, at least

not in the sense of a genuinely free market. There is only a manipulated market that's our own creation. We shape and re-shape, adjust and tinker with this deity to get it to meet our needs. We obey as we see fit.

If there were a truly free Market, we would still not have God, at least not YHWH. What we'd have is the sum total of what we can expect and even predict of our selfish, collective nature as human beings. The market, such as it is, is really nothing more than an image writ large of what we'll do to get what we want, of what will we sacrifice and what will we demand, not for the sake of anyone else, really, but for ourselves.

Hence, in both of American's great religions, that of Rightness and the other of servitude to THE MARKET, we're really engaged in self-worship. Surprise, surprise. But this is no surprise, hopefully, to Lutherans, and in particular to Crossing-practiced Lutherans.

If we worship nature, even if it's merely human nature, we're really devotees of another Baal, if not a golden calf we've made for ourselves. And to the extent that American fundamentalism is essentially a religion whose central tenet is that we're right about Jesus and others are wrong about Jesus, and thus we have our ticket punched while others don't, that is not the worship of God either, but of our own rightness. How smart and pious of us to make the right choice, to assert the right dating of the universe, to stop all sexual activity except the kind that we practice, and to keep women in their place and non-heterosexuals in the closet! Moreover, to the extent that we trust in our Rightness, we're self-worshippers, and closer to devotees of Baal than of God. (Take that, Herman Otten, and all other defenders of fundamentalism!)

American's God, as recognized by its institutions and its

common, public discourse, is clearly not the God one sees crucified in the place of those thrown down from atop the holy mountain to swim in the dung-pit with our Moabite enemies (to borrow from the the image of the Isaiah 25 text for Sunday before last—but the verses just beyond the appointed lesson). America's God is not the God whom we find with us, already here awaiting us in the ruins, crucified and left behind in the sea of indebtedness we find beneath our collapsed economy, the one in which we trusted for making our life meaningful.

Here, among the crucified, we find our place of worship and praise. This is where we spend ourselves as coins of a realm THE MARKET cannot touch. If America could truly know God, she/we would find God down here, in the ditched places of economic collapse, down here in the region of broken dreams, broken people, broken body, and spilled blood—down here where we die, and yet we sing.

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[NiednerCrossingsPresentation \(PDF\)](#)

"To Steal our Sin"

A Sermon on John 8:31-36

At a Celebration of the Feast of the Reformation

Second Crossings Conference, Belleville, Illinois, 21 October
2008

Preacher: Jerome E. Burce, D.Min.

+ In Nomine Jesu +

GRACE TO YOU and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ—the Annoying One, in case you missed it just now. Annoying because he *will* not be content tonight with “these Lutherans” who believe in him. Annoying because he *does* insist tonight on sticking these Lutherans with more freedom than they *want* to believe in—more freedom, they think, than they’re able to bear. Notice, he did the same back then to those “Jews who believed in him.” They didn’t like it either. They liked it even less—so will we— when he ratchets up the aggravation by calling us out. “If the Son makes you free you’ll be free indeed,” he says. And here’s what comes next: “I know you’re descendants of Abraham, devotees of Blessed Martin, as the case may be. I know you divide the Law from the Gospel, I’ve heard you gasping those Augsburg Aha’s as some of you call them. And yet. Yet, he says, you keep looking for an opportunity to kill me, because there is no place in you for my word. Not yet. Not really.

“What’s that?” I say. “You’ve got to be kidding, That can’t be me he’s talking to,” I say, “or if it is, how dare he”

“Gotcha,” Jesus says.

Amazing is it not, how this Jesus really is the Son, as in the

Father's spitting image. To soothe, he irritates. To clothe he exposes. To liberate he traps. To make us alive, yes, he will kill us first—only who of us wants to be dead? No wonder those savvy and perspicacious Jews who believed in him first are standing there at the end of chapter eight with stones in their hands.

Mind you, that's not where Jesus wants them, or us, to be. His aim, remember, is freedom. Our freedom. That means cutting us loose, first and foremost, from our pretensions. It means setting us loose on the world as sons and daughters—no, not of Abraham; still less of a Luther—but of God.

Something else to remember: this Jesus is no dilettante. He will get done what the Father sent him to do. So if to cut loose, if to set loose, he has to unloose first, where the thing unloosed is my inner stone-thrower, well so be it. He'll suffer those consequences. It's not as if he isn't used to it, you know.

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HERE'S THE THING about deep down serious sinning: the slaves are attached in more ways than one to the chains they hate. They can't imagine life without them.

For example: they didn't throw stones at me, but they did tell me, more or less, to shut up and quit aggravating them so with more Gospel than they were willing to repeat to the sons and daughters of God.

I was their teacher. Young, callow, gushing behind the ears. Prancing around under the lofty title, Lecturer in Theology. Given the person, place, and task it was a bit like saying "follicular designer" when what you mean is butch-cut barber.

They: they were my students, a ragtag collection of tenuously

literate men who were preparing for the pastoral ministry in a back-country corner of a very big island in the South Pacific.

Our topic that morning was Holy Baptism, comma, the benefits thereof. What good does it do? I pose the question, and someone who may have toiled through the text the night before, or probably not, puts up his hand. Baptism forgives sins, he says. OK, I say. What sins does it forgive?

With that the ghost of my namesake roars into the room—you know, Jerome, that brilliant linguist and shabby theologian of the late 300s? Luther slams him at one point for having said the very thing my students now say. What sins does my baptism cover? Original sin, says one. The sins committed before you were baptized—so says another. OK, I say, so what about those other sins—the ones you long ago baptized guys committed this morning? The ones you'll sin tomorrow? Is baptism good for that? No, they say. Can't be, they say. Baptism came first and the sins came later. For them you've got to go to confession. Communion helps. Otherwise you're stuck with them.

We in the know can hear John Tetzel salivating.

Came one of those rare, rare moments, for me at least, when the thought you need pops into your mind just when you need it. "Look," I say, "cut God some slack. Since when is God as chintzy as you make him out to be? Imagine an umbrella, I say. A big huge umbrella, one end resting on the moment of your birth, the other on the moment of your death—and where on the timeline the handle comes down, be it Day 8 or Year 8, Year 80 for that matter, that's quite beside the point. Whenever it happened, your entire life, beginning to end, was buried with Christ by baptism into death. What does this mean? It means that your yesterdays are covered by God's promise, well of course, but so are your tomorrows. It means that the sin you'll commit

tomorrow—and you will commit it, you know you will—that sin is already forgiven in Christ, even before you get there. So relax, and serve God with joy today. That’s what I tell them.

Big pause, you know; and for a moment, a brief lovely moment some eyes start to sparkle and dance—and then, to a man, the faces sag.

Jerry, they say, we *can’t* go preaching this in a congregation.

Why ever not, I say?

Because, they say, the Christians will go crazy. They’ll think they have a free pass to lie and steal and fornicate. They’ll stop putting their dimes and quarters in the collection plate. They’ll behave like wicked, useless pigs, and the church will be ruined.

And with I dropped the ball. What did I babble—something vague and silly about the Holy Spirit, I suppose. You want the truth? Way back here a little voice was telling me that they just might have a point.

I told you I was young and callow. Still stuck in my own sin. Or maybe, come to think of it, not stuck enough. Not stuck enough to see my sin, and theirs—and yours—for the horror that it is. Hateful, yes. But also useful. Finally compelling.

Lord of the Rings: you’ve read the book, seen the movie? Think Gollum, stroking the band that holds him in thrall. “My precious,” he purrs,. “My precious.” And even Frodo, our hero, can’t bear to part with it until it’s finally bitten away.

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WHAT I SHOULD have told my students that long ago morning was, in the first place, to relax, and to take some perverse comfort in the power of sin.

Have faith in sin, I might even have said, had I thought or dared to say it. Isn't that, after all, the primary faith we all keep living by? This assumes, of course, that you're willing to apply the term "living" to this stumble-bum existence we presently know.

Look, I should have said, you can preach the wild goodness of God until you're blue in the face, yet even so the Christians will toe the line, and not for holy reasons. So what if God massively forgives my sin? My neighbor the brute doesn't. And if, tomorrow, I sleep with his wife or steal his pig, he'll try to put a hatchet in my head. Now there's a sin I trust enough *not* to muck around with.

Chill out, I could have told them. The chains are on. Each sinner, looking to her own interest first. Each sinner in love with himself. That's me, I could have said, and were my brutish neighbor smart enough to know my sin he'd chill out too. I admire myself, you see. Self-respect, I call it. Guess what? His two-bit pig is safe, his wife as well—he can leave the axe at home. That too is how the law of sin will work—sometimes. Not always, never perfectly—by no means perfectly, the very thought is laughable. Yet somehow, as a rule, it works just well enough to keep the human race stumbling along till death do us part.

And there's this: every so often some brilliant sinner will come along and figure out how to manipulate the chains in such a way that things get better, incrementally, for lots of other sinners. I could have cited Adam Smith, or the founding thinkers of the U.S. Republic, though in that language, with those students, the hours of explanation would have been painful and very long. Suffice it here to say that the motto stamped on every U.S. coin is a silly lie. In God we do not trust. In sin we do. Hence those famous checks and balances that harness our self-interest in spheres both economic and political; that make

of it an engine that tugs us forward. If the harness breaks, then sure, let's pass the ammunition, but barring that you might say that sin has a lot going for it. It somehow works for us. In a weird and wicked way you might even call it precious. Our precious. And woe to the one who would rob us of it.

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BUT THAT OF course is precisely what Christ the Robber intends to do. Wasn't that, in fact, the first thing I ever heard about him, that he came "to take away my sin"? That he even died, so determined was he to grab my precious from me and to destroy it forever?

How might I, at this point, have conveyed to my students the agony this poses? Seems to me a time machine would have helped—a good

sized one, big enough for 15 men, teacher included, and we'd set the dial and zoom forward to this very moment, this very place, and we'd all look down. Did I mention that our machine is equipped with a "truthometer" that reads the hearts below?

They stand there faces shining as they sing the praise of God in Jesus Christ their Lord. They sit with straining ears as they listen to the Word; they itch, they ache, to hear the Gospel. These things we see. We see their great desire to please and honor God. They yearn to grow in faith, to serve Christ well.

And on our screen some other thoughts too. The former teacher now standing in the pulpit seems to glow with them. For example, "How good it is that we are here. How sweet it is to stand in worship for once with the little band of those who get it as others do not, we with our precious system for parsing texts and contexts, for crossing real life with real word, word read rightly, that is, and properly divided. Lord, we do thank thee that we are not like other Christians, or even like those other

Lutherans, so careless of theology—the rubes we're forced to cluster with at synod assemblies, at your district conventions; who infest those seminaries and headquarters of your own most holy and ill-served Church, and abuse your congregations. *We* read your confessions and put them to work, we treasure your cross."

Do those old students in their fictive time machine up there see what's going on? How the wretched slave, their old teacher, is still chained to fantasies of his own worth? How the thing precious to him is not in fact the rightness of Christ *for* him, but his own rightness in teaching or preaching Christ? How the yardstick he measures others by is not the rightness of Christ *for them*, but his own rightness about Christ and whether they happen to share it.

Forget old students now—their task is done. What matters is that *God* sees what's in this heart. Remember Paul's big point about this God, how he hates our boasting and will not endure it? Go figure, this is the same God who once so madly stretched a baptism over the whole of this life, this present patch of ugliness included. You might even say that this God in his wise folly or foolish wisdom has chained himself to *me*, of all creatures. In any case, he bites his tongue. He doesn't tell me simply to drop dead. Remember, he's done that once already, with another Son—and once was enough for all. So now he sends that Other Son, risen from the dead, to free the slave, to strike those other chains, to drag the fool kicking and screaming from fake living into real living. Yet again. For the umpteenth time.

Says Christ, "You're killing me. You've squeezed me out. Now give me that sin, that precious self-regard you mock me with. Hand it over before it finally does you in. The house is for children, remember? It isn't for slaves."

"My precious," I snarl.

+ + +

LOOK, IT HURTS to lose the chains. To live without regard for something I call my own— my kids, my money, my skills, my pedigree, my handle on the Gospel, thank you—to count these as nothing is downright scary. So yes I've kicked, I've fussed, I've thrown my share of stones at Christ my Lord who comes to steal that regard, and you have too. We'll throw some more tomorrow. You know we will. And so does Christ.

How astonishing, then, that he himself should come again tonight to drape us yet again in his inexplicable regard for us, and in God's regard for him. Look, this makes no sense, no sense at all. The word is "crazy." Yet, "Take eat—the body you helped to kill, the blood you drew, given and shed for you." Now off you go, he says, and have another crack at remaining in *this* word of mine. Starting tonight, in the context of this very conference you find yourselves at.

Could be that means for some of you what it means for me: an extra extra-wide helping of humble pie, especially on the subject of other Christians and fellow Lutherans in particular, the ones in apparent thrall to lesser and poorer accounts of the Christian Gospel than the one we get to confess—purely as a gift, by the way, through no merit of our own. Far be it from this slave to despise another for wearing chains of a different hue.

Or to turn that around and say it as Christ insists that it be said: far be it for this son to denigrate that daughter when the only thing going for either of us is the alien righteousness—you gotta love that term—that she was baptized into just as I was.

+ + +

A FAST FINAL thought:

They panicked, remember, about Christians going crazy as in sinning up a storm? Silly boys. They forgot how stingy sin is with the slack it gives its minions.

Christ's approach is altogether different. "Go nuts," he says. "You're as free as free can be," he says, "to paint the town red with my high regard for sinners. Bottom line: God counts as right those who are wrong because I their Christ am right for them. Go ahead. You do it too. Lavishly. Excessively. Beyond all reason or sense, common or uncommon; for they are God's "precious," insanely so, on my account; and so are you. It's time for you and them together to start *living* up a storm. Enjoy!"

"Oh," says Christ, "and by the way: to this end I'll stick with you, annoying you always, to the close of the age. Count on it. This time with joy."

May the peace of God that surpasses all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

+ Soli Deo Gloria +

[Sermon-CrossingsConf2008 \(PDF\)](#)

The Lord's Prayer: Efficiency, Efficacy, and Effect

Marcus Felde. Crossings International Conference, Belleville, Illinois, October 20, 2008

*"Ask and you will receive, so that your joy may be complete."
(John 16:24)*

A few years ago, at a regular gathering of ministers of various denominations, I was asked to take my turn leading the group in prayer. I knew them well enough to try something unusual, so instead of offering the customary impromptu oration I recited the Lord's Prayer.

I got a few curious looks, but no one was rude enough to criticize me. How could they? Nevertheless, I wondered if I had disappointed them. Would they think I was insincere? Uncreative? Would I have been wiser to offer petitions tailored to the situation, offered in a more personal style? Could I have come up with something better on my own?

I doubt it. The Lord's Prayer is terrific. I use it frequently: standing up, lying down, kneeling, driving, by myself, with others, in church, in meetings . . . As Toyota says, "Who could ask for anything more?"

The aim of this paper is to share how I think the Lord's Prayer works. I still struggle with the suggestive ambiguities and vague mysteries of this magnificent text. It is impossible for anyone to claim they have mined out all the riches of the prayer. But I would like to share with you what I find in the prayer that is exciting to me: its efficiency, its efficacy, and its effect.

Ed Schroeder wrote a few years ago: "The complementary term to Christian prayer is God's Promise, not God's Providence."¹ This clarifying distinction led inexorably to the conclusion that the engine under the hood of the Lord's Prayer must be precisely the

Good News that “God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them.” (2 Corinthians 5:19) I believe that the Lord’s Prayer, by its very structure, cries out for a dynamic interpretation that makes full use of the cross of Christ. This is the prayer of Christian faith, which boldly asserts that if we want anything from our Father in heaven, all we need do is ask in Jesus’ name.

Efficiency

“Do not heap up empty phrases . . .” (Matthew 6:7)

The Lord’s Prayer is certainly efficient. A few short, pithy phrases and it is over. When we pray, Christians do not need to use many words or long ones. Perhaps Jesus thought about shortening it even more; some of its phrases are omitted in Luke without changing the meaning perceptibly.

As compact as it is, the prayer has two major divisions, commonly acknowledged as having different themes. Within each division (or “great petition”) a set of petitions develops one important idea. The two great petitions parallel the two great commandments: “Love God” (with all your heart, and soul, and mind, and strength), and “Love your neighbor” (as yourself).

First Part: “Be God to Us”

The first three petitions ask, essentially, for one and the same thing. They all say to the Father in heaven: “Be God to us.” What we are asking for here is that the “greatest and first” commandment, as Jesus called it, might be fulfilled among God’s people on earth. Scripture is filled from beginning to end with the story of God seeking to bring us into a right relationship with himself.

In order to express this desire as fully as possible, the theme gets divided into three petitions, like terms of a hendiatris.² Combined with each other, they express the fullness of a righteous relationship with God. God must be our God in the realms of thought, word, *and* deed. The triad “name, kingdom, will” is suggestive of those realms.

1) When we ask that the Father’s name be hallowed, we mean that whenever the name of God (i.e., the *word* that represents him) is used, it should always be to God’s glory and not “in vain.”

2) When we ask that the Father’s kingdom come, we mean that *in all our hearts* God should be Lord over us all, through faith in him. That is to say, we should own none but God as Lord. No one and nothing should occupy the “God” spot in our souls.³

3) When we ask that the Father’s will be done on earth as in heaven, we mean that *in our actions* God should be God to us.

To love God, to have full faith and fear of God, is not three discrete things—it is one indivisible reality. For example, if the *actions* of God’s people are unholy, we dishonor God’s name and deny God’s Lordship over us. We should not try so hard to distinguish between these three petitions—they do, after all, overlap—as to see what they add up to. True faith in God or true love of God must be evidenced in all these ways, which together constitute the whole of human expression. We are dishonorable hypocrites if we fail to honor God in any of these three aspects of life.⁴ Partial homage is sin, not righteousness.

Second Part: “Be Good to Us”

The second set of petitions likewise presents one overarching great petition to the Father in heaven: “Be good to us.” Alternatively, we might say “Bless us,” “Take care of us,” “Give us life,” or “Give us your peace.” Here we ask for what we need for ourselves. However— and this is crucial—because the prayers

are for us to be blessed, they do not distinguish or separate out our needs from our neighbors' needs, or even from our enemies' needs ("Pray for those who persecute you"—Matthew 5:44). They are therefore the prayers of a world bound together by love. They constitute the *prayer of love*, just as the first set of petitions constitutes the *prayer of faith*. A life consistent with these petitions is a life of unbounded love of others. The deeds that match these intentions are works of love. Such love fulfills the second great commandment: that we ought to love our neighbors *as ourselves*.

For the purpose of our analysis, it works best to think of the latter petitions not as four but as three. When we do so, another triad emerges: "present, past, and future." Humanity has three sorts of trouble: present distresses, damaged pasts, dismal futures; or needs, hurts, and fears. We might be 1) in dire straits, lacking the essentials for survival; or 2) collecting and storing grudges and guilt; or 3) afraid of imagined future calamity. Any of those things can and will take away our peace. Thus the petitions of the second half ask God systematically and comprehensively for relief from all woe—real, remembered, or imagined.

To amplify just a bit: The petition which asks for our daily bread uses that as a metaphor to ask for all of our immediate needs, whatever we need *right now* in order to have peace. Luther suggests that this includes "food, drink, clothing, shoes, house, farm, fields, livestock," plus fourteen more items, "and the like." It takes a lot just to get us from one day to the next!

The next petition asks for the forgiveness of our sins (trespasses, debts). The way it is expressed seems at first blush to imply a contingent connection between our forgiving others and God forgiving us. But the prayer does not mean to

imply that we work a bargain with God to earn our own forgiveness. Rather, this petition sorts into two baskets everything of the past that can and does destroy our present peace—the wrongs we have done for which we need to be forgiven, and the wrongs *others* have done to us, which we (just as surely) need to forgive. If we are lugging around either kind of trouble from the past—and we all do!—we will not have peace. To be comprehensive, the petition must cover both.

A two-part petition then asks that we be delivered from the two sorts of *future* troubles that we might get into. First are those in which we might be implicated (temptation, failing in trial). But there are also troubles (or evils) which might befall us without our having caused them. Thus this petition encompasses all possible future events that might ruin our lives, both in the present through fear of them and in the future through the actual occurrence.

Our Lord's tiny prayer is thus so ingeniously designed that it constitutes a miniature outline for the comprehensive fulfillment in all the world of the first *and* second great commandments, which is to say for the world to be filled with righteousness through our having faith in God and filled with total peace through our unstinting love of one another: May our Father in heaven be totally our God—in thought, word, and deed; and may God bless all of us with peace, in every dimension. As angels once sang, "Glory to God in the highest, and peace to God's people on earth."

FIRST GREAT PETITION "Be God to Us" <i>(totally!)</i>	SECOND GREAT PETITION "Be Good to Us" <i>(comprehensively!)</i>
... in our speaking (Hallowed be your name)	... by supply our present needs (daily bread)
... in our thinking and believing (Your kingdom come)	... by healing what is wrong in our past (through forgiveness)
... in our doing (Your will be done)	... by freeing us from fear of the future (evil, possible temptation or trial)
Sum of the above: Righteousness before God	Sum of the above: Peace on earth

Efficacy

"Very truly, I tell you, if you ask anything of the Father in my name, he will give it to you." (John 16:23)

The Lord's Prayer is not just concise, however. It is also potent, in the sense that it *works*. The prayer derives its power from its author, by virtue of the fact that he *told* us to pray *like this*. In order to understand this, it is essential to consider the context of this prayer, in the whole work of Christ. Why does it matter that this prayer is our Lord's? Does this prayer accomplish what Christ came to accomplish?

The Problem

First off, we need to ask what sort of power a prayer needs. Is it the power of information? Is a prayer a list that we present to the Father in heaven, for appropriate action? Or do we have the power to change God's mind by our much praying? Is prayer an arbitrary obligation imposed on us, as a test to see whether we will be good? What exactly is the weakness or problematic on which a powerful prayer might need to work?

We say in the doxology which has been added to Jesus' prayer:

“The kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours.” The power is not in us, or in the prayer. The power is God’s. *What we need is standing.* Who has the standing to ask God for any favor? “Or what will they give in return for their life?” (Matthew 16:26) As Psalm 24 says:

The earth is the LORD’s and all that is in it,
the world, and those who live in it;
for he has founded it on the seas,
and established it on the rivers.
Who shall ascend the hill of the LORD?
And who shall stand in his holy place?
Those who have clean hands and pure hearts,
who do not lift up their souls to what is false,
and do not swear deceitfully.
They will receive blessing from the LORD,
and vindication from the God of their salvation.

Because of our sin we deserve not life and every blessing, but judgment and death. Jesus tells us as much when he says that the very nice man who went to the temple to pray did not go home justified. (Luke 18:14) Although he put his best foot forward, he did not even get a hearing. Sinners have no standing because of our sin; the righteous have no standing because, well, because they are also sinners.

The very fact that we pray for our Father’s will to be done on earth would seem to imply that, at present, that will is being flouted. Whose fault is that if not ours, collectively? Seen thus, the Lord’s Prayer is also a confession of sin! If God’s name is not being hallowed, if we do not hold God as lord in our hearts, etc., where do we get the temerity to ask for anything at all?

Jesus taught that we should “strive *first* for the kingdom of God

and his righteousness, *and [then]* all these things will be given to [us] as well.” (Matthew 6:33) How soon will *that* be? Our hypocrisy leads to judgment, not blessing. “This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are from me.” (Matthew 15:8) Things have fallen apart. The first step Jesus takes towards putting the world right is to remind us, by placing the first great petition on our lips, that all depends on our having God’s favor.

But if we are the world’s problem, how can we be the answer? How can we hope that *all those things* will some day be given to us as well? *The power prayer needs is reconciliation—that is, for someone somehow to remove the impediment of sin.*

The Power

Jesus Christ is the answer, come from God. He is the antidote to the antinomy between the two halves of the Prayer. In his own body, at his Word, on the strength of his subsequent death and resurrection, the one who is Son of Man and Son of God reconciles us to God so that we may approach our Father in heaven to ask for everything good. Now. We *may* ascend the hill of the Lord with petitions, since in baptism we have put on the clean hands and pure heart of our Lord Jesus.

Absent the context of Christ’s reconciling work, we would pray this prayer at some peril. If not for Christ, we ought to be afraid to ask that the kingdom of God come in all its fullness. But Christ has put paid to our fears by paying our debt and reconciling us to the Father, making us children of God. In him, at last, “righteousness and peace *have* kissed each other.” (Psalm 85:10) (The two weren’t really on speaking terms until Jesus.)

The power of the Lord’s Prayer, then, is the power in the promise of salvation which is accomplished in Jesus Christ, who

licenses us to pray boldly in this way. "He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else?" (Romans 8:32) Jesus not only teaches us this prayer, he cosigns it in his blood.

And in our beseeching for the kingdom of God to come (a kingdom with which we are now familiar), we are praying precisely for what God has given us—that in Christ we should be recovered to God's family.

When we pray the first great petition as believers in Christ, we are asking for God to be God to us on the terms which Christ makes available, believing that God's name is hallowed when we praise God's Son; God's kingdom comes among us when God's Son is recognized as Lord; and God's will is done when we obey the Messiah, the Son of God.

Luke 11:1-4 (NRSV)

He was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples." He said to them, "When you pray, say: Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread. And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us. And do not bring us to the time of trial."

Matthew 6:9-13 (NRSV)

Pray then in this way: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one.

And when we follow the first great petition with the second, we

who are already righteous through Christ are seeking the good of others as much as our own. As Luther says in his sermon on “Two Kinds of Righteousness,” when we are united with Christ his righteousness becomes ours. “Then the soul no longer seeks to be righteous in and for itself, but it has Christ as its righteousness and therefore seeks only the welfare of others.”⁵ This shift epitomizes what happens in the Lord’s Prayer.

People write prayers all the time, some of them quite lovely. But only because Christ himself authorizes us to ask, only because we ask *in his name*, only because he has taken our sins upon himself, do we have the standing to pray *this* prayer and know that we will receive all that we have asked for: namely, that “goodness and mercy shall follow [us] all the days of our life, and [that we] shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.” Because of Christ, it is no longer our dying that will make this world a better place, but our living.

Effect

“In your mercy, strengthen us through this [Communion] in faith toward you and in fervent love toward one another; for the sake of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.”

(Prayer after Communion, Evangelical Lutheran Worship, p. 114)

So what *happens* when this prayer works? Do we sit back and wait for life and peace and every blessing to be delivered like a pizza?

*If all of the raindrops were lemon drops and gum drops,
Oh, what a wonderful world this would be!
I’d walk around with my mouth open wide, . . .*

Would the world be better if benefits simply rained from heaven on the beneficiaries? Is that what we want, or what God wants

for us? No. This prayer asks for God's will to be done on earth as it is in heaven; and God's will is that we be filled with faith and love so that we live our life together to God's glory.

This prayer helps make that happen in two ways. First, by rehearsing (as often as we pray it) what God is doing in and for us; and second, by influencing believers to participate in all that work.

As we pray the six petitions of this prayer, we are reminded or recatechized to the effect that God who is our father in heaven:

- Has made his own name glorious, and will always do so;
- Has given us the kingdom, a kingdom which will stand forever and to which we belong;
- Always accomplishes what he sets out to do;
- Has given us each other, and provides for us—and always will;
- Has granted us all the forgiveness of our sins for the sake of his Son Jesus; and
- Holds our future in his hand—and will, to all eternity, so that death has no dominion over us.

At the same time, praying the prayer is a way of taking upon ourselves the delightful duties of children of God, who because of our faith and love want to:

- Lift up the name of the Lord however we can;
- Belong to the kingdom of his Son Jesus, and bring others into that kingdom;
- Enact the good and gracious will of God in all our lives;
- Provide for the needs of others;
- Forgive the sins of others, and help them to know God's forgiveness; and
- Defend and protect one another from any sort of evil.

The requests in this prayer, even as they are directed at God, are also reflected back upon those who pray it in Christ, so that we become, through God's forming our intentions into faith and love, the hands of God bringing salvation and peace and hope to the world.

This reflection of the petitions on us is evident in several ways. Most impressive to me is that every single petition, even as it is uttered, introduces the notion that we who pray must be involved in "making it happen." When we pray this prayer in Christ, we are (by the Holy Spirit, who teaches us all things) urging ourselves on in every good direction! To quote Philippians 2:13: "For it is *God* who is at work *in you*, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure." Or Ephesians 2:10: "For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, *which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.*"

Actually, we could say that the first three petitions do not ask God to *do* anything. We only ask God to *be* God to us. As I said before, if we were all doing our part, we wouldn't have to ask. It is not God who needs to be changed, but ourselves and our neighbors. These petitions should quicken *our* love for the Word of God, propel us to worship, and energize *us* to serve God in every possible way.

While the other petitions ask God to *do* something, to bless us, they nevertheless involve us personally in taking care of each other and ourselves.

For example, the fourth petition asks for our daily bread. Notice that we are instructed to ask for something we have to make! Not manna. In the next petition, no sooner do we ask for God's absolution than we commit *ourselves* to forgiving those who have wronged us. The sixth petition (at least in Matthew) asks

for protection from bad things that might simply happen to us, but also from the harm we might do ourselves by failing in trial or succumbing to temptation. I believe that each of these petitions was deliberately constructed in such a way as to remind us, whenever we pray to God, that *ora* (prayer) is not too far from *labora* (work).

A second and powerful way in which these petitions reflect back upon those who pray is the intentional use of the plural of the first person pronoun. *I* cannot pray this prayer for *myself*. To customize it by praying "My Father in heaven" would be to destroy the prayer. But I do not need to pray it that way! Others, when they pray, are praying for me. When I pray, I am praying for them. We are all praying for each other. This prayer, by putting the plural where we are inclined to use the singular, teaches us what it means to love our neighbor as ourselves. Conscientious use of this prayer, allowing our minds to be transformed by its words, should transmute selfish hearts into selfless.

Therefore, when we ask what the effect of the Lord's Prayer is, we have to conclude that it is intended to produce two effects. We are reminded of the shape of God's good will and work in the world; and we are re-enlisted in that work ourselves. When all is said and done, God is the same before and after our prayer, but we have been changed as we increase in *faith in God* and *love of neighbor*. We ask God for everything, and the generous reply—like that of a host at a banquet—is "Help yourselves!" I don't mean this in a Pelagian or semi-Pelagian sense, but in the complicated sense that we become by the Holy Spirit agents plenipotentary who answer the many cries of God's children, *even* for forgiveness. The two great petitions unfold into a prayer that God would work in us and in the world, for the sake of Jesus Christ and by the power of his Spirit, to make us people who fulfill the two great commandments. We are all to

become people who love God with all our heart and soul and mind, and who love each other as ourselves. It turns out that what Jesus wants us to want from our heavenly Father coincides with what God wants from us and wants to do in us—as Micah 6:8 says, “to do justice , and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.” This is the effect, or these are the effects, of praying and living the Lord’s Prayer, thanks to Christ Jesus our Lord.

Conclusion

I was reading an article about a man who got stuck in a New York elevator for a whole weekend, when I ran into a fascinating bit of information:

In most elevators, at least in any built or installed since the early nineties, the door- close button doesn’t work. It is there mainly to make you think it works. . . . Once you know this, it can be illuminating to watch people compulsively press the door- close button. That the door eventually closes reinforces their belief in the button’s power. It’s a little like prayer.⁶

Is that so? When we pray, are we pressing a dummy button? Is prayer futile? Do we believe in the power of prayer only because, every once in a while, we get what we ask for? Do our prayers rise up like incense only to evaporate?

In defense of the power of prayer, I have offered here my perspective on the internal dynamics of the quintessential prayer of Christian faith, the Lord’s Prayer. That is the button Christians push more often than any other. Do we get what we ask for when we use these words Jesus taught us?

Emphatically, yes. Christian faith seeks what God has promised

us in Christ. ***The Lord's Prayer gives a definite shape to this seeking, by outlining what God has promised and showing us how faith will respond.***

For, after all, prayer is faith put to words just as love is faith put to work. "*Legem credendi lex statuat supplicandi*" is the fifth century rule of Prosper of Aquitaine. Roughly translated, "How we pray establishes (constitutes?) what we believe."

The principle is usually employed with reference to the liturgy of the church, of which the Lord's Prayer is only a small part. In this paper I have tried to apply it vigorously (if not rigorously) to the prayer our Lord composed. If the Lord's Prayer were at odds with the theology we teach, we would certainly need to revisit our theology. We would not stop using the Lord's Prayer.

What I hope I have shown in this paper is that the Lord's Prayer should not be made to stand on the periphery of confessional Lutheran theology. In fact, the doctrine of "justification by faith" may help us see what is really going on in the Lord's Prayer, as well as how that relates to Jesus' other teachings about prayer.

"Ask and *you* will receive," Jesus taught. And he still says, "Ask for righteousness. Ask for the kingdom. Ask for peace. Ask for faith. Ask for love. Ask for freedom. Ask for God to be glorified. Ask, and God will give freely, out of mercy, for my sake." "Knock, and the door *will* be opened for you."

References:

1 Edward H. Schroeder,
<https://crossings.org/thursday/Thur0321.htm>.

2 A hendiatrix (Gk for one-through-three) is a set of three words representing concepts which are not disparate and unrelated but together sum up one totality. For example, “faith, hope, and love.”

3 Luther, in the Small Catechism, explains that the kingdom comes among us “when through the Holy Spirit’s grace we *believe*.”

4 Geoffrey Wainwright has written Doxology: *The Praise of God in Worship, Faith, and Life* –the subtitle strikes the same chord (a triad!).

5 Luther’s Works (St. Louis edition), vol. 31, p. 300.

6 Nick Paumgarten, “Up and Then Down,” in *The New Yorker*, April 21, 2008, p. 111. Emphasis added.

[TheLordsPrayerEfficiencyEfficacyEffect \(PDF\)](#)

God and Pastoral Care

Crossings Conference; Our Lady of the Snow; October 20 – 22,
2008

Who do you say “I am”; Getting Honest about God Today
Why Luther’s distinction of Law and Gospel matters more to the
world today than ever.

Pr. Phil Kuehnert

When I hear pastoral care, I think crisis, I hear cry! I

probably shouldn't, but I do. So this exercise is a way for me to refocus my thinking about pastoral care and in certain ways to consider the fragile ways that we as humans continue to think about , commune with, yell at and in general relate to God.

I know that Pastoral Care should not be evoked only when pain gives rise to the cry. I know that Pastoral Care is important to guide and interpret and celebrate God's people in all those stages of life – birth, childhood, coming of age, marriage, work, grandparenthood, retirement. My congregation and others like it pride themselves on providing “life span” pastoral care. An example would be Faith Inkubator's “Faith Stepping Stones”, where positive and intentional Pastoral Care is given to parents and children from Baptism through Sunday School to First Bible to First Communion into Confirmation instruction to Affirmation of Baptism to entry into High School and finally launches the child, now teenager with High School graduation. And yes, there is the delight of Pastoral Care in doing pre baptismal and pre marital conversations. But most often when I think about pastoral care I think “cry.” I think the cry and the response it evokes from Theresa whose 3rd marriage has just ended in a disillusionment, Theresa who cut my hair the first five years I was in Fairbanks. Betty for whom I provided premarital conversations for her and her 2nd husband. She has been in church once in the past six months. I shudder. When I think of Pastoral Care, I think Craig, the widower with three young daughters. I think of my own family and the tragedy that surrounds the death of my sister in law. When I think Pastoral Care, I think about Pat and Michael and Rudy and Delores and Bobbi and Jason and my brother Mark, with ages from 22 through 78, all in chemotherapy. When I think of Pastoral Care I think of David and Danielle, a couple I prepared for Christian marriage the week before Christmas this past year. They shared with me their intention of staying together in spite of David's

manslaughter conviction which carried a possible sentence of 7 to 10 years in prison. Sentenced to 7 years in February, David began serving time in March. When I think of Pastoral Care, I think of my visit with Matha, 80+ years old whose son moved her to Alaska two years ago. She is in the hospital with yet another bout of pneumonia. "Pastor," she says with a twinkle in her eye, "you know I'm ready." Her one desire is to die. It is Pastoral Care in this sense which I will attempt to be honest to God and about God in front of you, as I profess, as I say who I AM is. This is my attempt to be responsive to the conference theme – "Getting honest about God today."

It may not be all bad that I still think of Pastoral Care as crisis. In fact, it may be the point of jumping into the topic of pastoral care, especially if from a Crossings perspective we see crisis as the *Krisis* of the divine Critic who finally calls us/drives us to the cross in desperate repentance.

I should also think crisis when I hear the words Clinical Pastoral Education and Pastoral Counseling. Certainly the cottage industry, birthed in the 30's and 40's, that burgeoned in the 70's and 80's into full scale academic, institutional and clinical disciplines is in crisis. By sanctioning and supporting CPE and Pastoral Counseling as ministries in a clinical setting, the church (mostly main line denominations) provided a place for academics and clinicians to integrate the learnings from the human sciences into what had been the "cure of souls." For a variety of reasons, these disciplines in many instances lost their theological underpinnings and became secular mental health services with a light veneer of religiosity. Already in the late 80's Rodney Hunter, one of the then young luminaries of the movement was criticizing the movement as a whole, saying that God had been relegated to a bumper sticker that was slapped on the back of the bus as it was leaving the station. Although there has been much hand wringing about CPE and Pastoral

Counseling's lack of a theological base, not much has been done to address that issue.

My own experience in this world began in 1975 with four quarters of CPE at the Georgia Mental Health Institute and continued with 10+ years of academics and clinical supervision in working through a Doctorate in Pastoral Counseling and certification as a Fellow in the American Association of Pastoral Counseling. As a Lutheran Pastor who preached and administered the sacraments on a weekly basis in a parish setting, the two settings for ministry, the clinical and the parish, were often complementary with one enriching the other. But at other times it was much like living in two different worlds. I have more or less successfully integrated these two worlds, but the theological tension between the two remains.

In the world of pastoral counseling, especially in regional and national meetings of AAPC, I tried out my professing voice as someone who "still believed". I found few encouragers, mostly I was heard with patronizing tolerance. Then I lost my voice and dropped out of regional and national meetings. I am certainly not comfortable admitting this. So the present paper is an effort to once again find my voice, hopefully in a more encouraging environment. I want to be honest about my understanding of God in Christ, an understanding that has always informed by those buzz words "Law and Gospel" and more recently by Bob Bertram's "one gospel and sacraments."

What I hope to do is share with you my own journey of the past 64 years, more specifically the last 33 years in the area Pastoral Care and Counseling. In the process, I want to profess for myself and for those under my care as a Pastor and as a Pastoral Counselor who the great "I AM" is. While I hope this presentation does not degenerate into a maudlin confessional, you will see that I have lived my little world in an almost

perpetual state of crisis, for most of which I stand under divine critique. I hope that I can be honest about God today – with you!

It was in February that Bob Sugden irrupted in our Fairbanks Text Study. For almost 25 years now, a group of deacons, pastors and priests have met on Wednesday mornings at 9:00 AM to study the texts for the rising Sunday. It is an eclectic group – but for the most part leaning toward the left side of the American religious community. I say religious, because in my more grumpy moods I claim to be one of the few in the group that still believes in Jesus! Occasionally over the years, clergy from the more conservative side come, take a look, speak, then go silent and finally slip away. The exception has been Bob Sugden, a retired military guy in his late 40's, who is the preacher at Two Rivers Church of the Nazarene. Two Rivers is one of several old hippie communities that surround Fairbanks, its inhabitants being the quintessential APP (Alaskan Personality Profile): “leave me alone and I will do it my way, but by the way I want a triple share of my government entitlements”. Bob has been in the community for four years and has done wonders to tend, mend and grow the wounded and fragmented community that Two Rivers Church of The Nazarene was. Bob also attends the fundamentalist clergy prayer warrior group that meets at 10:30 on Wednesday morning. A year ago he shared with us that God had laid on his heart to be the bridge between these two disparate expressions of the Body of Christ in Fairbanks.

The irruption on that cold and bleary February morning caught my attention. Bob said, his cherry cheeks blazing with his squeaky Santa Claus voice strained in urgency, “Have you heard about The Shack?” Nobody had. He proceeded with a five minute synopsis of a book that left me spell bound. His normal hesitant speech was now a flow of eloquence and symmetry describing a riveting story line with mind boggling theological implications. That evening I

went to Barnes and Noble and was surprised to find a large supply of the book. That week I read it, finding it dealt with a topic that I have spent the last 25 years exploring, both as a pastor and as a pastoral counselor – the topic of theodicy. My intuitive instinct was that it would become a break out best seller like other religious books that have had huge cross over acceptance. Here I was thinking about Scott Peck's The Road Less Traveled, Rabbi Kushner's Why Bad Things Happen to Good People, The Left Behind Series, Wilkerson's The Prayer of Jabez, and most recently, Rick Warren's, The Purpose Driven Life.

I did not read it critically from a theological standpoint – I read it as the younger brother to Paula Hope, my sister who was still born in 1942. I was the child born to my parents 2 1½ years later, alive! I read it as the brother in law to Jeani, my wife's sister, who almost five years ago was beaten to death by her husband, my brother in law Jim, beaten to death with a baseball bat. I read it as the pastor of Craig, husband to Stacey and father of four daughters including toddler Hayden. Craig comes to church with his three surviving daughters. Weeping through most the service, he admit he struggles in his believing in God. Just over two years ago he was piloting a high powered jet boat on a family outing up the winding Cheena river less than a mile from where I live. Distracted for a moment the boat ran up on the steep bank and overturned trapping his wife and his 2 year old daughter Haydon. A fireman by profession and EMT by training, he was helpless to rescue his wife and daughter. They drowned.

When I read The Shack, I read as the pastor who less than two years before had preached a funeral sermon to a standing room only crowd of 500 + based on Hailey, the oldest sister's confirmation verse.

Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own

understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight Proverbs 3:5-6

The Title of the Sermon: **Broken Paths.**

The unthinkable has happened. And because of the world we live in, the unthinkable will continue to happen. That is why we have fire departments and EMTs. Even the best trained and the most careful are not immune to the unthinkable, and the unthinkable has happened. And our paths are broken. And yet our broken paths have led us to this place at this time to hear God's word. The unthinkable has happened; an innocent person died on a cross in a travesty of justice. The unthinkable has happened, God abandoned his son on the cross. The unthinkable has happened, Haydon, precious Haydon, and her dear, intense, committed hard working mother, Stacey, drowned in a terrible accident.

You will not hear that things are going to be OK. They will not be OK for a long time.

You will not hear that this is just one of those things. If we believe God is in charge, the death of these two precious people cannot be just one of those things.

You will not hear that this will make all of you better people. This may break you, ruin your lives.

You will not hear that you were chosen for this because God wanted to use you and your faith as an example for others. That is almost blasphemous. We don't know... You will not hear God wanted them in heaven more than we wanted them on earth. You, nor I nor any person knows the mind of God or what he wants.

But this is what you will hear: You will hear Hailey's Confirmation Verse, and you will may even memorize it. You will hear that God does not abandon his children. You will hear that we grieve, oh do we grieve, but we grieve in hope. And You will hear that you have choices to make, because broken paths mean

you have choices.

My pastoral care with Craig and his family continues. Hailey is now a high school senior and works 20+ hours a week in our congregations child development center. The next oldest daughter is in my confirmation class. The “cry” of this father/husband and sisters and daughters ring in my ear every week. So when I read The Shack, I heard their cry echoes in the cry of Mack. As the husband to my wife Judy, the sister of Jeani, I read The Shack with my own family’s cry. . Many things in the story touched me deeply. But it was the struggle of Mack who holds God accountable for the brutal rape and murder of his three year old daughter that riveted me to the pages.

For those of you not familiar with the book or the firestorm of criticism that it has stirred, you need to know a couple of facts. I was shocked early in July when I saw that The Shack was no. 1 on the NY Times Trade Paperback Best Seller List. By the end of July it had sold 1.2 million Copies. In the religious fiction market, if a title sells more than 10,000 it is considered a best seller. By the end of September, more than 2 million had been sold. When I checked its current listing the last week of Sept on the Amazon.Com selling list, it was No. 4. However this was telling. The No. one book had 70 some reviews, the No. 2 had 9 reviews, the No 3 had some 20 odd reviews, The Shack at No 4 had over 1500 reviews submitted. When I checked this past Saturday evening, it was No. 1 with 1606 reviews submitted.

I am not here to discuss the theological merits of the book, I present the book as an example of what I think is happening with God and Pastoral Care.

If I had to redo the title of this presentation, I would make one change, I would change the capital G to a small g on the

word God. god and the gods have always been used in pastoral care, again small p and small c. Generic pastoral care happens all the time and the generic god or gods are called into existence. People are starved for pastoral care, and people will find pastoral care. But Pastoral Care, capital P, capital C is honest about God. Let me offer two definitions.

First: pastoral care provides an audience and a vocabulary for the Cry that arises from the vicissitudes of life.

Second: Pastoral Care provides the community of Christ with its vocabulary of Law and Gospel (one gospel and sacraments) for the Cry that arises from the vicissitudes of life.

That means there will be pastoral care and Pastoral Care. There are cries and there are Cries. While I respect and stand in awe at the power of words and relationships to provide a vocabulary and an audience for the cry, as a Lutheran pastor, I am not proud to say how little I have traveled down the road of integrating my clinical and academic experience into my Lutheran theology, especially the Law Gospel part of it. My wake up call to where I was headed in losing touch with my Lutheran heritage came at a Pastors Conference at Solid Rock Bible Camp in Soldotna, AK in the late 90's. At that time I was up on step in balancing Pastoral Counseling and Parish Pastor responsibilities. Our Samaritan Counseling Center in Fairbanks had a new competent and hungry director, an LCMS pastor, Dr. Fred Schramm. I was doing one day a week of pastoral counseling at the center with the blessing of my congregation, living out a "pre-acceptance agreement to the call" to continue my identity as a Pastoral Counselor. Ed Schroeder was our featured speaker, and because of our prior relationship, he felt that he had a right to put me and my pastoral counseling on the spot. I was more than pleased to oblige. The details of the encounter have long since faded, but the sting of humiliation of that encounter

is still felt today. As only Ed can do, he pushed me into a pastoral counseling case that I felt very good about. I came out feeling that I was offering nothing in that case, to that couple, except psychological insight and support. My identity as a Lutheran Pastoral Care provider was missing. What was worse, was that I was lost, I had no vocabulary to describe what I was doing. I'm sure that my "deer in the headlights" response was noticeable to Ed, because he in his uniquely caring way suggested that I had some more thinking to do about my work, and moved on.

In retrospect, the encounter with Ed highlights the hard work of pastoral care even before it becomes Pastoral Care. 10 years before I had completed my doctoral project, In Defense of the Indefensible: Theodicy in Pastoral Counseling, in which I had developed my definition of pastoral care and counseling. The "cry" and the "response" was central in the case material that I presented. And in that work, I did present a reasonable Law-Gospel theological orientation that honored the theology of the cross, using Jurgen Moltmann's theology as my starting point. But the intense focus of a doctoral project soon becomes fuzzy and then dim, and in my case, very dim.

So when I read The Shack, I suddenly found myself in familiar territory. The book is a great example of living out the hard work of theodicy. It's popularity reflects the hunger of many to hold God accountable. The book presents God as being physically present. God, in three persons, speaks to the "cry" and provides a response. "This is good stuff" I found myself thinking again and again.

Pastoral Care is hard work, because it takes God seriously. Pastoral care does not take God seriously and removes the prophetic liability that goes with being honest with God today. The time between my dissertation and that encounter with Ed, I

had gotten sloppy with my Pastoral Counseling and it devolved into what Ed discovered – pastoral counseling. The same was true, I am certain, for my Pastoral Care which had devolved into pastoral care. And not only is Pastor Care hard work, because it of necessity carries with it the responsibility to provide God's judgment, it provide a ready amount of risk. The risk is meeting the "old adam" that denies his need of repentance. That denial becomes reactive and is often is experienced as intimidating.

Let me give you a recent example of the risk that goes with Pastoral Care that is Honest to God Today. A week ago this past Saturday in Thursday Theology 539a, titled "Colleagues, I couldn't Resist", Ed brought his crossing critique to bear on President Bush's address to the nation on Thursday of that week in which Bush said about the financial crisis "'We can solve this crisis and we will,' The piece was a typical Ed Schroeder rant, similar to the one he wrote following the Va. Tech shooting last Spring, and more recently, on Rev. Wright, Barak Obama's pastor. His critique of President Bush seemed so dead on.

The next day, in Sunday Morning Bible Class, a class on the early church fathers perspective on Baptism, ably led by Billy Raulston, a lay historian with a particular interest in the early church, I made what I thought was a relevant and innocent remark in response to the growing controversy between the African Church and the Italian Church as Augustine and Pelagian's followers went at it. I said that I had trouble with President Bush's statement that he/we could and he/we would solve this crisis. You would have thought I questioned the Virgin Birth. Flaming eyes appeared and three in the class gave emotional responses. Two of them defended President Bush's confidence, saying that to do anything but that would simply fuel the panic and create more instability. One man, who I deeply respect, said that if he had a car that needed to be fixed he wouldn't bring

it to church but to the best mechanic who knew how to fix it. As you might expect, I spent the rest of the Bible Class and not a small part of the sermon time in the next hour – my associate was preaching and it was the third time I was hearing his sermon – obsessing about what I had said and why it created such a reaction. All that and wondering why I felt compelled to say anything at all, because, really, I don't want to upset anybody. COME ON, PHILIP, GROW UP! Why am I so afraid to take the risk?

Pastoral Care, in which God is taken seriously and honestly is difficult because it puts the care provider in most cases in the position of theodicitist, not just apologist. Being a theodicitist is a high risk business. C. S. Lewis does this again and again. He is not afraid to bring God into the "dock" and listen. His famous quote, "God whispers to us in our pleasure, speaks to us in our conscience and shouts to us in our pain. Pain is God's megaphone to arouse a sleeping world," illustrates this. This same theme is the premise of Paul Brand and Philip Yancey's classic, The Gift of Pain. Is God active in his "critic" role in the events of the world and the vicissitudes of personal life? To suggest that God is, or even might be, exposes the dishonesty of the heart that has become sick with idolatry. To defend God's action in the world as C. S. Lewis does so personally in A Grief Observed, is the result of trusting the promises.

Pastoral Care begins with a very personal view of God reflected in Genesis 2 – 12 and profoundly explicated in Exodus three. Being honest about God means that the great "I Am" who dramatically reveals his sacred name in Exodus 3, is that God who sees and hears Adam and Eve in the Garden, who confronts Cain, asks Noah to build his Ark with architectural plans, creates the confusion of languages in response to the chronic idolatrous pride of the human race and binds himself to Abraham in an irrevocable covenant. This God sees and hears the

suffering of his people and responds with his personally chosen Pastor Care provider for the children of Israel – Moses. We know that Moses, Like any Pastoral Care provider wants to do in sane moments when confronted with intractable evil, Moses wanted to run the other way. But God was patient – and if you count – God puts up with and tolerates quite patiently four excuses until God loses his temper and says – go and I will send with you Aaron.

In other words, Moses did not want to hear the cry, because if he did not hear the cry, he would not be moved to provide a response. People cry because they hope that someone is listening, that someone will provide a vocabulary and ultimately some meaning to their life.

Reality shows, talk shows and call in shows legitimate the cry. And most of the shows provide a response and an audience/community. Think for a moment of Rush Limbaugh and his community of Dittoheads, or of Dr Laura and her groupies, Oprah, her show and her magazine, and Dr. Phil. All of these personalities (spell with a capital P) are pastoral care providers. Listen to Dr Phil or Dr. Laura or Russ and in a week you will “get” their gospel, which in fact is no Gospel at all.

And while these radio and television shows are relatively recent, there have always been books. Up until the last century, many of the books have been religious in nature. Many of these books have been the old form of “self help.” Books and literature for centuries provide stories and expressions of the cry and responses that “ring human true.” There is a reason that Eugene Peterson compared The Shack to Bunyan’s Pilgrim’s Progress. They lie in that form of “self help” pastoral care, an OTC (over the counter), alternative pastoral care literature that meets the need for the “cry” to be heard.

The Road Less Traveled, Why Bad Things Happen to Good People, The Prayer of Jabez, the Left Behind Series and The Purpose Driven Life are examples of people seeking and finding self help pastoral care. The books are the theological equivalent of OTC (over the Counter) drugs and alternative medicines. The Shack is just the latest of these, and in each there is an explicit presentation of God, the exception being The Road Less Traveled. And The Shack is unique in the way that it presents the Trinitarian community, a la Moltmann, (but of course without attribution) as the audience and the source of the vocabulary that responds to the cry of Mac, the father of three year old Missy who was kidnapped from a remote campsite in the Cascade Mountains and brutally murdered by a serial rapist.

Most interesting are 12 step programs and recent efforts to replace the "higher power" of AA with Jesus. 12 step programs generically are certainly pastoral care. The question remains, does replacing the "higher power" with Jesus make them Pastoral Care. It may, and it may not. It has to do whether or not the one gospel is professed as the power of God. My congregation in Fairbanks was the first to bring Celebrate Recovery to Alaska. Overcomes Anonymous is a fundamental version of AA. I have some exciting theological work to do with Celebrate Recovery.

But people seek pastoral care and find pastor care outside of religious circles. Women, if socially adept, will use their friends and television personalities for pastoral care. Dr Phil, Dr Laura and Oprah are three of the better known alternative pastoral care specialists in the media. Joyce Meyers is probably the best known that comes with an expressly religious orientation.

Men, if socially inept, turn to porn. If it is true that 50% of men in the United States use internet pornography on a regular basis, the allure, thrill and fantasy of the masturbatory

encounter provides an audience and a vocabulary for the cry that emanates from the frustrated sexual and relational needs of many men. It is pastoral care.

Married couples also have their alternative form of pastoral care. If it is true that 40% of intact marriages in the United States have survived either disclosed or undisclosed affairs, it means that both men and women seek pastoral care – an audience, a shared vocabulary for the cry that comes from the myriad of frustrations that go along with marriage – in the initial euphoria and lust that drives extra marital affairs.

But the “one gospel and sacrament” have so much to offer. They, the one gospel and the sacraments become the heart of Pastoral Care because finally there is the good news that transcends the unthinkable horrific. Finally there is someone who has the courage to speak those things that are “human true” because there is the One who absorbs the horrific with His cry. The “final diagnosis” (Eternal Problem) morphs into the “initial prognosis (Eternal Solution). In the community of those who carry His mark upon their brows, a common vocabulary is formed that finds both its etiology and its syntax from the one who speaks the Word that cleaves the darkness. That “someone” is one who sees the anger and hears the cry. What is often overlooked is something that is so obvious. The community that gathers around the one gospel and the sacraments in its very being transforms the life of the community into pastoral care prophylaxis.

Pastoral Care as Prophylaxis

Charles Simic (recently poet laureate for the United States) in his review (NYRB, Oct 9, 2008) of Philip Roth’s latest book Indignation begins with this Chekov quote.

There ought to be behind the door of every happy, contented man some one standing with a hammer continually reminding him with a tap that there are unhappy people; that however happy he may be, life will show him her laws sooner or later, trouble will come for him – disease, poverty, losses, and no one will see or hear, just as now he neither sees nor hears others. Anton Chekhov "Gooseberries" in *The Wife and Other Stories*.

Still in his introduction, Simic again quotes Checkov, this time, reflecting on the present United States policy of baning images of dead soldiers' homecoming and burials. Simic: "What he (Checkov) has to say on that subject was true of Russia of his day and is true of America today:

"The happy man only feels at ease because the unhappy bear their burdens in silence, and without that silence happiness would be impossible."

Medically, we have come to expect it; dental surgery, or surgery of any kind – get off your blood thinner. For certain patients, a regime of antibiotics before surgery, for other the donating of your own blood should it be needed. An important part of dental care is your semi annual Prophylaxis. And of course immunizations are so interesting – giving you a small bit of the disease so you can produce the anti bodies that will keep you from getting the real thing.

From a Pastoral Care standpoint – Prophylaxis comes with being part of a worshipping community. The worshipping community is God's guarantee that the cry will be heard. Anyone who has been in a worshipping community knows that the faithful are not "immune" to cancer, children with special needs, tragic deaths, suicides, and all those other vicissitudes of life that give birth to the "cry." These events that are lived through closely (I taught Sunday School with him last week) or at a distance

(they went to the early service) are a solemn reminder that the cry goes up from the community. The faithful watch and listen. They watch whether or not the afflicted stays in the worshipping community or drops out. They listen to what their fellow members say and they listen to the pastor. The community is the man with the hammer behind the door of every “happy” person reminding them that there are unhappy people – people who have just had their marriage fall apart, or worse, fear that their marriage may be falling apart, people who are in chemotherapy with their hair falling out. The faithful see and hear the cry and know that they are not immune. The faithful witness how a pastor responds when her husband comes out of the closet and declares himself gay. They witness how the couple who led the youth group when their children were teenagers deal with the break up of their marriage. Children hear prayers for those undergoing chemo and ask their parents what “chemo” is. The wise parent will introduce and not only clarify the cry – why we pray for Michael who is getting chemo and whose hair is gone – but also introduce the vocabulary of the response.

The role of the Pastor (lay or ordained) is critical at this point. It is the Pastor in preaching, in casual conversation, or in intense tending to a particular “cry” that must again and again hold up the one gospel and the sacraments as the place resolution/reconciliation/justification is experienced. In this sense, it is hard to imagine Pastoral Care as being only incarnational presence. Pastoral Care is the response in the vocabulary and the rites and rituals of the Christian tradition that of necessity includes proclamation of the one gospel which then also points to the sacraments.

Theologically, the cry in its primordial state arises from Cain! The Theological point of the unfair situation is found in God acting as the therapist/theodicist/Pastoral Care provider to confront Cain with the death that is beginning to brew in his

heart. This is the quintessential “Not Fair” situation. This is an interesting passage because there is a widespread theodical effort to get God off the hook. Even Hebrews get in on the act in which Able is commended for offering a better sacrifice than Cain. The test was not for Able, he was the gifted one – the test was for Cain, the slighted one. The argument goes like this: “Don’t blame God. Able brought the acceptable offering – the lamb, and Cain an unacceptable offering – produce from his fields.” This is blatant reading back into the text in order to get God “I am who I am” off the hook for choosing to accept Able’s gift and reject Cain’s. Class and race riots erupt when the inequality of the situation reaches a ignition temperature and there is a spark to set it off. The inherent inequity of the race situation in the United States over the past 200+ years gave rise to the riots in Watts and other cities when MLK was assassinated. The inherent inequity in the care of a special needs child as one parent assumes a primary role and the other gropes for a way to deal with the grief, leads to the break up of these extraordinarily stressed marriage. And in the sibling relationship, we have the quintessential rivalry temporary resolved in the murder of Able.

I have used this text more than any other in my ministry as a pastor and as a pastoral counselor. I do so because I am Cain. My brothers are Able. A vivid childhood memory is my taking a broom stick and hitting my older brother Mark on the head while he sat unsuspecting on a Red Ryder wagon. I do not know why I was so angry but I know that there was always a residue of anger boiling beneath the surface, primarily because I was the youngest brother and the two older ones – one 11 years older the other 6 1½ years older – being the youngest was something I never accepted. They were off to St. John’s in Winfield or off doing exciting things during the summer working the wheat harvest on the great plains. My parents, especially my mother

lived for their visits home, hoarding the goodies of all kinds until the older brothers came home. And as I got older, the anger increased. My bother Richard was a gifted organist/musician/mechanic who it seems to me could do anything mechanically or musically. My brother Mark was a gifted athlete and a tow headed all American boy – everybody liked Mark. Then there was me, and oh did I try to compete – musically with Richard, athletically with Mark, and with both of them in importance with my parents. The mantra in the house, because of Dick's blatantly open wild side and Mark's compliant and hidden wild side was "Be like Mark, don't be like Dick."

Did I mention, they both went into the ministry.. and I followed. Not because I wanted to but because I had so little confidence in myself that I took the route of least resistance and went off to Concordia College in Austin, Texas. By that time, my oldest brother Richard was an established church planter in Houma and Morgan City, LA with the most beautiful woman in the world as his wife and mother of three daughters.. and Mark was finishing his seminary education in St. Louis and married to the 2nd most beautiful woman in the world. Then it started all over again. As I graduated from seminary and a year of graduate school, with older brothers, successful, well liked pastors of growing churches – I was given as my first parish, Trinity Lutheran Church in the lower 9th Ward of New Orleans, a struggling black parish still recovering from the disaster of Hurricane Betsy.

So God, the therapist, goes to Cain and says – Why are you angry? And before Cain can protest "I'm not angry" God asks – why is your face down? You can tell when someone is hurting. God extends pastoral care to Cain confronting him with his attitude and not letting him off the hook. The God question is always – "Why are you angry?" It is the caricatured portrait of the counselor, "so how do you feel about that?" Notice that God, the

therapist, pushes deeper, asking for the deep inspection of the heart, “why are these feelings so powerful?” Usually in these instances a Genogram is a great help to uncover the generational roots, but in this case the biblical record provides no information for “family of origins” issues, except for this important one. The apple doesn’t fall far from the tree. Cain’s parents had done the same thing. But God’s role in the two stories is different. God learned something, like the therapist in training, God may have realized that he intervened too late with Cain’s parents. Not wanting to do the same, when he sees anger in Cain’s face, he confronts him. With Cain’s parents, God, the Pastor Care provider intervenes only after they disappear. God goes after them and confronts them, asking them to be honest. What God gets is the classic blame game. Without further comment God launches into his judgment.

Back to Cain: “If you had done the right thing, you would be smiling.” TEV “If you do what is right, will you not be accepted?” NIV. “If you do well you are accepted” NEB It is interesting to note that the TEV points in a different direction than the NIV and the NEB. The (TEV) looks at the past – “If you had done the right thing...” God asks Cain the incriminating question: Why did you give the offering in the first place? Cain was looking for a response, a return for his offering. – He saw what he got... but he also saw what Able got. Able received the blessing – He did not receive the blessing -- If you are older, you may remember your Sunday School leaflet picture where the smoke does not go up but rather curls down around the altar. “And Cain was very wroth.” It wasn’t fair. He brought produce – he was a farmer. Able brought fat portions from some of the first born. Technically Cain didn’t bring an offering, it was a deal. Here is how it might have gone: “I’ll bring what I can so that I can get at least the same response from God that my brother Able did.” The NEB and the NIV translations focus on his

impending decisions – “If you [in the middle of this crisis and your raging reactivity} do well, you will be/are accepted.” If you Cain, handle your reactivity in a positive way, you can avoid disaster. Is the implication that God is testing him, warning him?

What follow supports God as critic. The divine therapist, using reality based therapy, having confronted the affect, confronts the nascent sin. The imagery will relate to anyone who has experienced a spontaneous mood swing. Sin is crouching at your door, its desire is to possess you, but YOU must overcome it. This is the engine that drives all recovery programs. You (!) must over come it. The affect is not the sin, but the affect can lead to sin or right behavior. In Cain’s case – there seems to be no stopping him. Behavior modification therapies are based on the premise that there is a decision point, no matter how small, in which a person makes a decision about her/his behavior. The higher the level of reactivity (anger/rage) the shorter that decision making time. Undeniable factors that affect the decision making process is the general level of stress, past history and the basic emotional wiring one inherited from forbears.

The emphasis on personal responsibility, “but you must overcome it” (TEV) is what has made 12 step programs unique and successful. Blaming and scapegoating are brought to an end. There is the rigid repentance track (“work the program”) that finds its basis in the biblical process of repentance and forgiveness. The Divine critic, at work through His deputies – Nathan with David, Paul with Peter, Paul with the churches in Corinth, Galatia, Thessalonica, etc. – names the sin. Jesus himself is the quintessential practitioner in case after case, e.g. with the woman at the well, numerous times with the disciples, with Peter and Thomas in separate incidents post resurrection. Not all sin will be dispelled – Cain murdered his

brother. There is every indication that the murder of my sister in law was pre meditated – as was Cain’s murdering his brother. And to say the words with meaning – “forgive them for they know not what they do” – exhibits a faith that comes only from the far side of the cross.

But the story does not end there, nor dare the Pastoral Care encounter end with judgment. For indeed God’s judgment is always “more than I can bear.” (Cain’s complaint). As Harry Wendt in his Crossways! Materials points out, in the stories of Adam and Eve, Cain and Able, The Flood and the Tower of Babel, the sequence of Sin and Judgment always concludes with Grace. For Cain, it was the “mark.” Is this where the baptismal formula comes from? “Child of God you have been sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever?”

Which brings us finally so some observations about Pastoral Care in practice.

Once the prescription is written and the glasses are fitted, we begin to see in scripture Pastoral Care in this “crossed” sense again and again. The pain is seen, the cry is heard and God responds. The temptation is to avoid, as I did for decades, the hard and prophetic work of proclaiming the one Gospel and framing the sacraments in a way that counterfeit gospels and the faux pastoral care, especially the OTC, “self help pastoral care” kind are exposed for what they are. But that needs to be done with care, as my example with one simple word about Bush’s comment about fixing the economy illustrates. The simple formula “Sin – Judgment – Grace” hangs together. Not one part of the formula, however, comes with protocol that fits more than one situation. Sure, sin is sin, but.... Right, prescriptive Judgment

is written but... Of course amazing Grace is undeserved love, but...

The hard work begins with the Pastoral Care provider addressing her/his own cry and allowing it to be heard in the Community of Christ. This is where the great gifts and contribution of CPE and any sort of clinical training become invaluable to the Pastoral Care practitioner. On a lay level, one is hard pressed to find fault with the Stephen Ministry program, because it has benefited immensely from the wisdom gained by the Kenneth Haugk's unique background as a LCMS pastor and clinical psychologist. For professional church workers, the CPE experience is still invaluable, However, systems theory seminars (Peter Steinke's work) that help care givers work through their own family of origin issues can provide great help in getting the personal and prejudicial to a manageable level.

The balance of Law and Gospel in application is predicated to a great degree on how that has been worked through on a deeply personal level. Henri Nouwen's writings, especially his classic The Wounded Healer provides encouragement for that kind of introspection, as does The Road Less Traveled. Psychotherapy, with a therapist who has boundaries intact and is respectful of the religious experience can be immensely helpful. Personal experiences sensitize the ear to hear the cry and the eye to see the pain. Active participation in a worshipping community where the entire drama of sin judgment grace is lived out and spoken and celebrated on a weekly basis is a non negotiable. While the last thing someone in the midst of the tragedy wants to hear is your tragedy of 30 years ago, as the relationship builds – the question will ultimately come back, "what about you...?" And if it doesn't come, later as the process of Pastoral Care matures, permission may be asked to share your own story.

Walking in someone else's shoes is not a pre requisite to provide Pastoral Care. What is necessary is one's own crossing

narrative, where the diagnoses and the prognoses have been lived out in the daily putting death the old man with all its sins and evil lusts and day after day putting on the new man to live before God (honestly) in righteousness and purity forever.

Pastoral Care is relational. The relational is diagnostic first. Sensitivity to the history of the cry becomes so important, for often the cry is generational. Wisdom to interpret the true cry is necessary for often the cry is disguised. Relations take time. They take time to build the trust that removes the veneers of denial. Pastoral Care takes its time to build a shared vocabulary, a vocabulary that will echo the one gospel and the sacrament of the receiving community of faith. The community of faith provides the context.

Pastoral Care is contextual. The cry that comes from a LCMS middle aged man who was raised in a Lutheran home and went to a Lutheran elementary school who has lost his wife in an auto accident will be different from the cry that comes from a 20 something single woman who has just had her third child by a third father. The ability to hear a response will be different for a veteran of Iraq suffering from PTSD than for a professional church work. Within the church/worshipping community, we never know what we are dealing with until the cry comes forth, is heard and placed in its originating context.

Pastoral Care for the faithful within the community is the tears and joys of harvest time. Hungry for the word, appreciative of God crimate activity in their lives and bodies, they celebrate the feast that is to come. The liturgy with its rites and language is there to be unleashed with the power of centuries old and breath taking new expressions of Sin, Judgment and Grace. All Saints' days, Lent – especially Good Friday, the Easter Vigil and Easter are opportunities to celebrate the joy of victory of God acting in our midst – as the antiphon for

Easter proclaimed 'On this day the Lord has acted!' And weekly "This is the feast of victory..." or any of the great variations of the Gloria.

Pastoral Care for the tangentially connected – and this is not a small group – presents the greatest challenge. These are the people, now more than ever, who were at one point connected to the worshipping community in some active way, but now are the "de-churched." They are brought back crying. The megaphone of pain has awakened them. They are now the unhappy. Some want to wrestle with God. Others want the release of the cry. They remember, usually faintly and with not a little distortion, that there are promises for the broken. Psalm 23 may linger in their memory, or the Lord's Prayer. The connection is so fragile. They come to see if "they are still in business." They come often not knowing why, except that there is a place and a person for them. With these, the development of the Pastoral Care relationship can be powerful and almost immediate. But for others, the brief promising encounter ends with the frustrating realization that a lasting connection was not made with the One who offers so much.

Finally, Pastor Care for those who know not the One but know a lot of other ones, those who know and have tried many gospels but have never heard the One Gospel – Oh dear Lord, for this equip us and make us bold and courageous. For what ties us to them is the "cry."

Several suggestions:

For reading and referral

A Grief Observed C. S. Lewis

Disappointment with God, Three Questions No One Asks Aloud

Philip Yancey

Mourning into Dancing Walter Wangerin, Jr.

The Shack William P Young

The Road Less Traveled M. Scott Peck

For those who have experience the loss of a loved one and have made the worshipping community their home, I have found nothing better than this:

Berthold Von Schenk (1895 – 1974)

For all the Saints A prayer book for and by the Church IV

When we are bereft of dear ones, it is tremendous shock. For a time we are stunned. Not everyone can feel at once their continuing companionship. We should not for that reason despair. An adjustment must take place in our lives, reaching deep into our habits, emotions and thoughts. Some souls may make this adjustment quickly. For most of us it comes slowly and hard; many an hour is filled with loneliness and agonizing doubt.

By ourselves we can never make this adjustment. We must come to a sense of the continuing presence of our loved ones, and we can do this if we realize the presence of our Living Lord. As we seek and find our Risen Lord we shall find our dear departed. They are with Him, and we find the reality of their continued life through Him. They worship the Risen Christ face to face, while we worship the same Risen Christ under the veil of bread and wine at the Altar. At the Communion we are linked with Heaven, with the Communion of Saints, with our loved ones. Here at the Altar, focused to a point, we find our communion with the dead; for the Altar is the closest meeting place between us and our Lord. That place must be the place of closest meeting with our dead who are in His keepings. The Altar is the trysting place where we meet our beloved Lord. It must, therefore, also be the trysting place where we meet our loved ones, for they are with the Lord.

How pathetic it is to see men and women going out to the cemetery, kneeling at the mound, placing little sprays of

flowers and wiping their tears from their eyes, and knowing nothing else. How hopeless they look. Oh, that we could take them by the hand, away from the grave, out through the cemetery gate, in through the door of the church, and up the nave to the very Altar itself, and there put them in touch, not with the dead body of their loved one, but with the living soul who is with Christ at the Altar. Our human nature needs more than the assurance that some day and in some way we shall again meet our loved ones "in heaven." That is all gloriously true. But how does that help us now?

When we, then, view death in the light of the Communion of Saints and Holy Communion, there is no helpless bereavement. My loved one has just left me and has gone on a long journey. But I am in touch with her. I know that there is a place where we can meet. It is at the Altar. How it thrills me when I hear the words of the Liturgy, "Therefore with angels and archangels and all the company of Heaven," for I know that she is there with that company of Heaven, the Communion of Saints, with the Lord. The nearer I come to my Lord in Holy Communion, the nearer I come to the saints, to my own loved ones. I am a member of the Body of Christ, I am the living cell in that spiritual organism, partaking of the life of the other cells, and sharing in the Body of Christ Himself.

There is nothing fanciful or unreal about this. Indeed, it is the most real thing in my life. Of course, I miss my loved one. I should miss her if she took a long holiday trip. But now, since she is what some people call dead, she is closer to me than ever. Of course, I miss her physical presence bitterly. I miss her voice and the sound of approaching footsteps. But I have not lost her. And when my sense of loss becomes too great, I can always go to my meeting place at the Altar where I receive the Body and Blood of my Lord that preserves my body and soul just as it has preserved her unto everlasting life. Do learn to

love the Altar as the meeting place with your beloved who have passed within the veil. Here again the sacraments the heart of our religion. The Blessed Sacrament links us not merely to Bethlehem and Calvary, but to the whole world beyond the grave as well, for at the Altar, the infinite is shrined in the finite; Heaven stoops down to earth; and the seen and the unseen meet.

“Oh, God the King of Saints, we praise and magnify Thy Holy Name for all Thy servants, who have finished their course in Thy faith and fear, for the Blessed Virgin Mary, for the Holy Patriarchs, Prophets, Apostles, and Martyrs, for all Thy other righteous servants; and we beseech Thee that, encouraged by their example, Strengthened by their fellowship, we may attain unto everlasting life, through the merits of Thy Son Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.”

And for the place of the Sacrament in the ongoing life stream of Pastoral Care, this by Dom Gregory Dix

Dom Gregory Dix (1901 – 1951)

For All The Saints A prayer book for and by the Church IV

[Jesus instituting the Lord's Supper] told his friends to do this henceforward with the new meaning “for the *anamnesis*” [recalling or re-presenting] of Him, and they have done it always since.

Was ever another command so obeyed? For century after century, spreading slowly to every continent and country and among every race on earth, this action has been done, in every conceivable human circumstance, for every conceivable human need from infancy and before it to extreme old age and after it, from the pinnacles of earthly greatness to the refuge of fugitives in the caves and dungeons of the earth. Men have found no better thing than this to do for kings at their crowning and for criminals

going to the scaffold; for armies in triumph or for a bride and bridegroom in a little country church; for the proclamation of a dogma or for a good crop of wheat; for the wisdom of the Parliament of a good crop of wheat; for the wisdom of the Parliament of a mighty nation or for a sick old woman afraid to die; for a schoolboy sitting an examination; for Columbus setting out to discover America; for the famine of whole provinces or for the dead soul of a lover; in thankfulness because my father did not die of pneumonia; for a village headman much tempted to return to fetish because the yams had failed; because the Turk was at the gates of Vienna; for the repentance of Margaret; for the settlement of a strike; for a son for a barren woman; for Captain so-and-so, wounded and prisoner of war; while the lions roared in the nearby amphitheatre; on the beach at Dunkirk; while the hiss of scythes in the thick June grass came faintly through the windows of the church tremulously, by an old monk on the fiftieth anniversary of his vows; furtively, by an exiled bishop who had hewn timber all day in a prison camp near Murmansk; gorgeously for the canonization of S. Jon of Ac-one could fill many pages with the reasons why men have done this, and not tell a hundredth part of the. And vest of all, week by week and month by month, on a hundred thousand successive Sundays, faithfully unfailingly, across all the parishes of Christendom, the pastors have done this jus to *make the plebs sancta Dei*— the holy common people of God.

[GodandPastoralCareCrossings \(PDF\)](#)

‘And there’s no other God’: Being Honest to God about God

When Paris Hilton, the celebrity who became a celebrity by becoming a celebrity – when Paris Hilton walked into the Central Regional Facility in California last year, she was clutching a Bible and a book. The book, *The Power of Now* by Eckhart Tolle, had been championed by Oprah Winfrey, who said that her favourite quote was in the first chapter: ‘Man made god in his own image. The eternal, the infinite and the unnameable reduced to a mental idol that you had to believe in and worship as my God or your God’. Ms Winfrey later observed that ‘Jesus cannot possibly be the only way to God’ – and given the god she and Tolle were talking about, she was quite right. To *that* god Jesus is certainly not the Way.

The Power of Now, published in 1999, was on top of the best-seller list for several years. According to one reviewer, ‘there is not very much new about *The Power of Now*: it is Buddhism mixed with mysticism and a few references to Jesus Christ, a sort of new age reworking of Zen’. Tolle’s follow-up book *The New Earth* (Amazon moved 3.5 million in one month), is an extended riff on the same subject. Says a reviewer: The ‘encapsulating idea... is that by abandoning your ego, you become present in the immortal being.’

Tolle and his books remind us of the religious context into which many of us are called to make our confession to God in the world. We won’t explore that context today, but it might be useful these days for us to keep in mind this telling image: Paris Hilton going before the judge, in her hand a Bible and *The Power of Now*.

1

The title of this presentation is a line from the second verse of Martin Luther's famous hymn, *A Mighty Fortress is our God* (composed 1527- 28). The verse as I learned it in Confirmation class goes like this:

With might of ours can nought be done,
Soon were our fall effected;
But for us fights the Valiant One,
Whom God himself elected.
Ask ye: Who is this?
Jesus Christ it is, of Sabaoth Lord,
And there's none other God –
He holds the field forever.

About whom is Luther singing here? Who is the Valiant One whom God himself elected? It is Jesus Christ, true man and true God. Other than this one, there is no God. That is Luther's response to the problem of the hidden God. It's Luther's solution and the Lutheran solution. In Article 8 of the *Formula of Concord* Lutherans confess: 'Apart from this man [Jesus Christ] there is no God' [FC SD VIII.81].

The hidden God, the God about whom we creatures in our arrogance speculate, is a problem, a massive headache for us. We can't see this God, we can't control or manipulate this God, we can't get at or get to this God, no matter how hard we try. Is this God of magnificent abstractions for us or against us? We don't know. The hidden God is a terrible threat to us.

It would help if we could see God, have certain and sure knowledge of God, then we'd know what God thinks of us, and we could work out how best to please God and get God off our backs and on our side. The longing to see the immortal, invisible, God

only wise is as old as humanity. Moses asked: 'Show me your glory, I pray.' God said: 'You cannot see my face, for no one shall see me and live'. What God *did* do was to show Moses the divine backside. Just that. Many centuries later Jesus' disciple Philip repeated Moses' request : 'Show us the Father', Philip said. Jesus' response was simply: 'If you've seen me you've seen the Father'. That response was echoed centuries later by Luther and the Lutheran Confessors when they said: If you want to see and know God, look at Jesus Christ. There is no other God.

Faith in God is always and only faith in the Christ. This fact junks all philosophical speculations about God and all preconceived notions about how God is or should be. The reality is that if human beings are truly to know God, then all human preconceptions and constructs of God must first be destroyed through the cross of Christ. The natural human expectation is that God will be revealed in the supernatural and the miraculous, in signs of power and glory...like the shock and awe of Sinai or Carmel. We expect God to meet our criteria for what God should be and how God should make Godself known to us. Instead, of course, we find that the carpenter's son from Nazareth is God's full and final revelation to us. That's how God has chosen to reveal God to us, so that's the revelation we are stuck with, to put it bluntly.

That's a bigger shock than Sinai or Carmel! Look at Jesus of Nazareth and read God off from him ... well, look! That babe, nursing at the breast, totally dependent on his mother, helpless, defenceless, lowly – that's God. The young lad, obedient to his parents, learning the Word of God in the synagogue, that's God. The grown man, nowhere to rest his head, ministered to by a group of women, walking in Palestine at our pace, that's God, our three-mile-and-hour-God. That man, kneeling to wash his disciples feet, bending down to defend a troubled woman, that's God, our kneeling God. That worm of a

man, stripped naked in full view of all – his private parts at the eye-level of passersby, bruised, bleeding, thirsty, dying, dead and buried – that's God! It can't be, and yet it is, and that's the only God who is any good to you.

God with a human history.

Even the resurrection, without which the crucifixion is meaningless, even the resurrection was at the time no public triumph. The risen Jesus was not seen by those who killed him or were complicit in his death; as far as we know, the only human enemy he appeared to was Saul of Tarsus. The resurrection of Christ is a triumph and a revelation of God only to the eyes of faith. That's the nature of faith: it always deals with what is hidden, not seen. *Some things have to be believed to be seen.*

What's going on here? Paradoxically, God is revealed in deepest hiddenness, the hiddenness of opposites. This concealment is actually for the sake of revelation. Hidden revelation removes the one big obstacle to effective revelation, namely human pride. If somehow I could come to know a saving God through my own observations and deductions, or if by my own efforts I could get the God I want, or if God's self-revelation was plain and open and easily grasped and very attractive, then there'd be no need for faith, indeed no room for faith, and my pride would be so inordinate that I would become in fact an enemy of God.

Room for faith. Faith has to do with things not seen. To make room for faith, God hides everything which is to be believed – hides it deeply under its opposite. The place where everything is hidden is under the cross. Under the cross. Level ground there. Room for faith.

In a sermon on the comfort of the Holy Spirit in times of persecution, Luther speaks movingly of the man Jesus as the revelation of God:

To recognise Christ means that he was given for us and has taken my sin upon himself, that is, that I consider that all my things are nothing, that I drop all that is mine and believe alone that Christ has been given to me as a gift, that his suffering, his godliness and all his goodness are altogether mine. When I recognise that, I can do nothing but love him, for I must be dear to a man like that. Then I climb further on the basis of the Son to the Father and see that Christ is God and has placed himself into my death, my sin, my misery, and also gives me his love. Then I recognise there the Father's friendly will and his highest love which no heart can fathom; so I take hold of God where he is softest and think: well, well, that's God; well, well, that is what God's will and good will are like, that Christ does all that for me. So in his [Christ's] face I feel the highest inexpressible mercy and love of God...Thus God must be recognised in Christ alone.

Note, first, that Luther is not concerned with showing that Jesus is God – he takes that as a given. He wants us to know *what this God is like and what God's attitude to us is*. To know those things, Luther says, look at the human being, Jesus of Nazareth and see that God is for you, not against you. Note, secondly, the references to the 'blessed exchange' which is so integral to our understanding of the atonement. Christ as man takes my sin and I receive his righteousness. In this, Christ's humanity is central: Christ's human suffering, his godliness, his human obedience, his moral goodness are transferred to me, 'are altogether mine' as Luther says, just as my sin is his and my punishment.

Ah, what comfort! When you are up against it and can see no meaning to your life, the God of nature and the stars is exposed as useless, as are the tarot cards and the crystals, the mystical stones and all the other paraphernalia of superstition. But the triune God comes and says in person, 'I care for you. I

reveal all my authority and power to you in a way that you can grasp it, so that you do not have to be afraid of me. I, your God, allow myself to be done to death for you'. You hear this and you begin to see that your life is not a meaningless meandering. It has a purpose and goal. Jesus Christ is God's first and last word to you, yes, when God seems to be silent; yes, when God shakes Wall street; yes, when everything seems to be against you and hope-less. Yes. Here is God at our level, a God who proves God's love for us so conclusively that we are persuaded that nothing in all creation can separate us from that love.

To conclude the first part of this paper, I want to refer briefly to a set of 28 theses which Luther prepared in 1518, and in which he unveiled the main elements of his emerging theology of the cross. Three key theses are actually more about the theologian of the cross than the theology of the cross. First, Luther says that the person who claims to be able to figure out the nature and logic of God by looking at the world God has made and God's actions in the world, does not deserve to be called a theologian. Secondly, a true theologian is one who comprehends what is visible of God through suffering and the cross. Thirdly, the opposite of a theologian of the cross is a theologian of glory. He or she calls evil good and good evil. The theologian of the cross says what a thing is. Calls a spade a spade.

The difference between the two kinds of theologians, notes Gerhard Forde, is first of all in the way they look for God in the world, in their 'seeing' (19,20), then secondly and consequently, in their speaking (21). Faulty or misdirected sight results in false speaking.' (*On Being...*, p 71)

We have seen that for Luther, true knowledge of God is found only in Christ. In these theses, Luther is more specific: the sole authentic locus of one's knowledge of God is the cross of

Christ, in which is revealed God's powerful weakness. Looking at God through the lenses of the cross is, as Luther rather crudely puts it, like looking at God's backside (Exodus 33). It's an indirect, even hidden revelation, but a genuine divine revelation nonetheless, even though God is not immediately recognisable as God. The cross is not where God is supposed to be and not where we really want to find God...because if that is where our God is to be found, that's where we have to go: to death, to the end of us and all our pretensions.

So knowledge of God is found at the very point where God's path on earth ends in apparent failure: in the suffering and dying humanity of Christ. Theologically and pastorally, this is crucial. We are in danger of missing God completely if we look for God in places of our own choosing (the mountain top experience, signs and wonders, revelations, 'glory' places) and avoid the only place where God's full divinity has in fact been revealed: down at our level, down among all the dirt, the grime, the injustice, and the pain of our lives and the world's.

True theology and recognition of God is in Christ crucified. Christ *crucified*. God is particularly known through suffering. A deep spiritual truth is being confessed here. It is not merely that God is known through suffering (whether the sufferings of Christ or of the individual), but that God actually *makes Godself known* through suffering. God is active in this matter, rather than passive, inasmuch as suffering and temptation are means by which we are brought to God. For us friends of the cross, then, suffering is not a senseless intrusion into the world; it is, rather our most precious treasure, for in it is revealed the living God, working out our salvation.

One final thought: the theologian of the cross is hope-full, because of the resurrection. Indeed, a theology of the cross is impossible without a theology of the resurrection: the two are

inseparable. A resurrection presupposes a death: Christ's death, and our death with him. We fight that death tooth and nail, but if we don't die with him we won't live with him.

2

Let's return now to where we began: the single line from Luther's hymn: *A Mighty Fortress*, in which Luther confessed that there's no other God than the man, Jesus. I quoted the English translation which I learned in my youth: 'And there's none other God'. According to one website, there are extant more than 100 different English translations of Luther's hymn, the first of them being by Myles Coverdale in 1539. Poets such as Thomas Carlyle and Catherine Winkworth have offered translations. Apparently the most popular English translation is by Frederick Henry Hedge (1805-1890). His rendering of the relevant line of Luther's hymn is: 'from age to age the same'. Hmm. My hymnbook said: 'And there's none other God'; Frederick Hedge said: 'from age to age the same'.

What did Luther actually write? He wrote: 'Und ist kein andrer Gott'. Some of you speak and/or read German. Which translation is the better rendering of Luther's words, 'Und ist kein andrer Gott? Fact: 'From age to age the same' is nothing like what Luther wrote. What's going on?

Frederick Henry Hedge was professor of Ecclesiastical History at Harvard Divinity School, and one of the editors of *The Christian Examiner*...and he was pastor of various Unitarian congregations. There, I reckon, is our answer. Unitarianism rejects the doctrines of the Trinity and the divinity of Christ. The criteria for belief and practice are reason and conscience. It is understandable then (but not excusable), that Frederick Hedge should replace Luther's confession concerning God and Christ with words which reflected his own heterodox beliefs.

But what of English Lutheran hymnals compiled and published in North America? The 1941 LCMS hymnal had 'and there's none other God'. The 1982 edition gave two readings: 'and there's none other God' and 'God's only Son adored'. The 1930 ALC hymnal had two versions: 'our only King and Lord' and 'True God from heav'n he came'. The 1958 *Service Book and Hymnal*, used by most of the predecessors of the present ELCA, adopted Hedge's Unitarian mutilation: 'from age to age the same'. Isn't that odd. Why would Lutherans choose to give up the sound Lutheran confession and follow a Unitarian? The 1978 *Lutheran Book of Worship* of the ELCA has 'God's only Son adored'. Why did the members of that hymnbook committee reject the accurate translation and good confession which was available to them in some English hymnals: 'and there's none/no other God'? If some members of the committee are still alive, maybe you can ask them.

Fact: many Christians, including many Lutherans, have a problem with confessing before the world that apart from the man Jesus there is no God, and that the saviour God is to be found in the man Jesus alone. Why is that?

Part of the answer lies, I believe, in the challenge presented by two other 'no others' which are integral parts of the Christian confession.

The first 'no other' is found in Acts 4:12, where Peter says that there's no other Name by which we are saved. The context is this: Peter and John had healed a crippled beggar and had been arrested for 'proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection of the dead'. They were asked: 'By what power or by what name did you do this?' The apostles answered: 'It is by the name of Jesus of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed...salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name...'

You can't miss the reference to 'the name' (x3; 5x in vv7-18). For OT believers, the Name means first and foremost God. It has a revelatory content. It means primarily God's revealed nature and character – the Saviour God. God is Saviour and Lord, *kyrios*. Before his birth the angel said the child's name would be Jesus, 'for he will save his people from their sins', and he will be called Immanuel, which means 'God with us'. Paul confesses that God has given Jesus God's own name: *kyrios*, and at that name all shall bow and all confess: 'Jesus Christ is Lord'.

We confess that God is Saviour and Lord. We say the same about Jesus Christ: he is our Saviour and Lord. He and no other; he alone delivers us from the power of sin, death, law and the wrath of God.

Luther in his hymn echoes Scripture's exclusivistic claim concerning Jesus Christ: 'there's no other God'. Scripture makes a further exclusivistic claim about that same Jesus Christ: he has a monopoly on salvation. In him and in no other is life and salvation. His exclusivity as Saviour consists in his inclusivity: he is the only Saviour who died for all and offers God's life to all who believe.

Both claims are offensive to reason and to those of other faiths, both speak of an exclusivism which jars sensitivities in 2008. Christians are tempted to try to wriggle out from under both claims. Surely there are other ways apart from Christ for the saving God to be known, just as there must be other ways to salvation apart from Christ. In both cases we, however, can only proclaim: No other: no other God, no other Name.

The third 'no other' in the trilogy of 'no others' is 'no other gospel'. You'll recognise the reference to Galatians 1:6. 'I am surprised at you!' Paul says to the recent Galatian converts,

'In no time at all you are deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ, and are accepting another gospel' –and here the apostle's grammar runs away with him (but as Joseph Sittler once observed: 'Where grammar cracks, grace erupts'). Paul corrects himself: 'Actually there is "no other" gospel, but I say this because there are some people who are upsetting you and trying to change the gospel of Christ' (Gal 1:6,7 TEV).

Those who are called are, in Paul's language, those whom God has made God's own. God's grace or unmerited favour had worked the change in their lives; grace was the element in which they were now living, the air they were now breathing. From grace they were turning to a perverted gospel. The gospel of God's grace is an exclusive thing; any other way of salvation, any modification of grace means a different gospel. Grace and gospel are complementary terms. No grace no gospel.

The peddlers of 'another gospel' which should not be called gospel, were robbing the Galatian Christians of the comfort and certainty of salvation which only the authentic gospel gives.

Later on in the letter Paul proclaims this gospel. He writes:

The Law has nothing to do with faith. Instead, as the scripture says, 'Whoever does everything the Law requires will live'. But by becoming a curse for us Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the Law. It promises life only to people who obey its commands. Christ rescued us from the curse that the Law brings...Christ did this in order that the blessing which God promised to Abraham might be given to the Gentiles by means of Christ Jesus, so that through faith we might receive the Spirit promised by God (Gal 3:12-14, TEV).

Note two things in these verses: First, the recurring reference to 'promise' [in the next five verses 'promise' is referred to five times]. We are reminded that God deals savingly with us

always through promises, promises which we are moved by God's Spirit to trust. We cling to God's saving will as revealed in Christ, and to God's promising word. Note, secondly, the reference to the 'blessed exchange'. Deeper aspects of this whole transaction are found in 2 Cor 5:18-21, where it is clear that God has been reconciled not by some payment given to God, but rather that *God* has paid the penalty. God suffers the curse which God's own law demanded. God takes sides with us against Godself. God against God. For us.

I won't enlarge on what the gospel is for Paul or for us; you know it well, thanks be to God. Suffice it to say that the notional or grammatical subject of all gospel sentences is God-in-Christ. 'God so loved the world...' 'God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us'. 'God made him who had no sin to be sin for us so that in him we might become the righteousness of God'. And so forth. A reversal of subject and object, where we become subject and God object, results in a counterfeit gospel, in which we do something to satisfy/please/ manipulate God so that God must forgive us, bless us, serve us or whatever. Clearly that's no good news. It neither magnifies Christ nor comforts troubled consciences. And there's no room for faith in Christ.

The false gospel which Paul was combating did have room for faith, but not *faith in Christ*. It required faith in one's works of law, which the apostle sets in strong contrast to the 'hearing of faith', that is trusting God's promises fully filled in Christ Jesus. In Gal 4:21 Paul speaks of those who 'desire to be under the law'. He was opposing those who taught that one entered into and maintained a relationship with God by one's own righteous works. The author of the letter to the Hebrews, who was probably battling something like what Paul was battling, makes it very clear in chapter 7 and 8 of that letter that trying to know God and relate to God in the way Paul's opponents

proposed is a return to the old covenant, the law, and is a rejection of the promise.

Essentially this false thinking is behind all 'other gospels' we hear today. Paul would turn in his grave! The gospel is changed into law, or the law is mixed with the gospel – and that's the death of the gospel. Gospel Plus or Gospel Lite are not variations on the gospel. They are not gospel. Bertram: 'Gospel-plus is gospel-minus, no gospel at all'.

It is distressing to see how other gospels permeate the proclamation and practice of the church today. According to Ed Schroeder, who has an inbuilt OG [other gospels] detector, current mission theology asserts that the gospel is not about the forgiveness of sins for Christ's sake, but about God transforming the broken world 'into an eschatological Eden of peace, justice, and the integrity of creation' (Schroeder, ThTh #369).

Everyday, garden-variety 'other gospels' are represented by such pulpit platitudes as: God accepts you if you try to do your best, if you are sincere in your intentions, if you open your heart to God and let God into your life. Or: God will be merciful to you if only you have recognised just how much you need God. Or: be sure to repent and confess your sins, for when you do, then God is moved to forgive you and make you God's own child.

And thousands more. The bottom line is: you do this and that to please God, then God will do this and that for your good. In the matter of salvation, other gospels say, there's got to be *something* which we do, which we gotta do, to supplement God's saving action. Counterfeit gospels enslave; the true gospel liberates.

Purveyors of 'other gospels' are unhappy with the idea that

everything to do with our salvation is all from God and only from God. Have you noticed that many preachers of 'other gospels' are suspicious of the sacraments, downplay them or even reject them. The sacraments simply are not part of their proclamation. Why might that be? Because the divine actions in the Washing and the Supper are outside of our control. God does what God has promised to do and we have no say in the matter; we don't lift a finger, nor can we. There are no ifs, no provided thats, no negotiations between us and God. Infant baptism is a classic example of what I'm talking about.

God's actions are done to us, from outside ourselves. We don't baptise ourselves; we are baptised, we are passive in the event. God just does it to us, washes us, forgives us, makes us children of God, gives us the faith which grasps the saving promise in the sacraments, and so forth. And still you hear complaints: You mean I have no choice? What about free will? Such complainers just have to have a finger in the salvation pie.

Consider the Supper. We hear the words: this is my body, my blood given for you. Christ gives us himself and his righteousness. It's an alien righteousness, so called because it comes from outside of us. Everything to do with our salvation comes from outside of ourselves. That's a killer blow for the proud old Adam in us, but that's how it is. Who's complaining? We hear Christ's words in the sacrament – given for you, shed for you – we eat and drink, trusting the words, and say: Yes, for me, for me. Amen. Thankyou Jesus. Thankyou. What a blessed relief! God is for me, God is on my side.

No wonder pedlers of 'other gospels' don't like the sacraments. The sacraments are pure gospel. Unmixed. Pure. Pure gospel is the enemy of all false gospels and all false gods. It dethrones all idols.

No other God, no other Name, no other gospel. These three 'no others' go to the heart of our proclamation. The God whose promises we trust is known only in and through Jesus Christ. Apart from this man Jesus there is no saving God. God chose to bring us salvation through this man and through no-one else. Clearly, then, there is salvation in no other than in this Name, the Lord Jesus Christ. And the gospel which we proclaim has at its centre and circumference the Lord Jesus Christ, in whom is the 'yes' which affirms all of God's promises (2 Cor 1:20). There is no other Name... no other gospel ... no other God.

JGStrelan

Slacks Creek Queensland

October 18 2008

[AndThere \(PDF\)](#)

Biblicism in the ELCA? Can that be true?

Colleagues,

A number of ELCA folks have emailed me in recent days telling of their unhappiness with 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 common theme of these complaints has been: What this manual says is "Lutheran" about how to read the Bible—and says it over and over again—is NOT Lutheran. Frequently it actually contradicts what Luther himself said about the Bible—and even more significant—contradicts the

Lutheran Confessions. [Lutheran Confessions more significant than Luther? Yes. For it is not Luther, but the Lutheran Confessions that the ELCA constitution designates as its “official” theology.] Here’s what the ELCA constitution says:

2.05. This church accepts the Unaltered Augsburg Confession as a true witness to the Gospel. 2.06. This church accepts the other confessional writings in the Book of Concord.

If this manual actually does contradict the doctrinal criteria of articles 2.05 and 2.06, how did it get official sanction in the ELCA? I too wonder. Who’s taking care of the store?

Here’s one such communication from Chris Repp, ELCA pastor in Carbondale, Illinois. He says: “These notes grew out of reading the OBF material and talking about the Bible with my Sunday morning adult class as a way of organizing my own thoughts.”

Chris occasionally comes home across the Mississippi River into our Missouri-Kansas ELCA Synod as Russian-language interpreter when our “companion synod Lutherans in Russia” are here for a visit. From 1999-2003 he was ELCA guest professor for Church History and Systematic Theology for the Russian Lutherans at their seminary in St. Petersburg. And in order to qualify for that he did a doctoral dissertation nearly a decade ago titled: “In Search of an Orthodox Way: The Development of Biblical Studies in Late Imperial Russia.” So he comments: “I’ve been thinking about things biblical for some time.”

Peace and Joy!
Ed Schroeder

Some thoughts inspired/provoked by “Opening the Book of Faith”

In the first paragraph of the first chapter of this book, the author seems to claim for the Bible what the Augsburg Confession claims for the ministry of preaching. "Through the Bible, God draws us to trust, to faith in the good news of Jesus Christ. Through the Bible, the Spirit of God calls, gathers, enlightens and makes holy the entire people of God." (OBF, p.1)

But the Augsburg Confession, Article V, says "To obtain such faith God instituted the office of preaching, giving the gospel and the sacraments. Through these, as through means, he gives the Holy Spirit who produces faith, where and when he wills, in those who hear the gospel." (German text in the Kolb/Wengert edition of the Book of Concord, p. 40)

The Augsburg Confession claims that it is the proclamation of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments (which are instances of the gospel – see AC VII where this connection is made explicitly) that do this. I think it's significant that the AC does not say, at the beginning of article V, that in order that we may obtain such faith (namely, the faith that justifies sinners, as was spoken of in article IV) God gave us the Bible, but rather that God instituted the office of preaching. "Preaching" always means "preaching the gospel" in the AC. The Bible (as an instance of the Word of God) is a resource for this proclamation, the resource, really – the source and norm of our faith (see Formula of Concord, epitome 1, Kolb/Wengert Book of Concord, p. 486). But it is the proclaimed gospel, not the Bible, that generates faith.

Inspiration

What do we mean by saying that the Bible is inspired? It means that here the Holy Spirit is doing something. That something is communicating the gospel and creating faith. (See again AC V) OBF p.2 says "The Spirit of God speaks there." But that only

happens when the gospel is communicated on the basis of the biblical witness. Inspiration is about how the Bible is USED, not some intrinsic quality that the Bible HAS. The Bible is a resource – a uniquely valuable resource – for proclaiming the gospel. It spells out what the gospel is – and also what it is not. Because the Holy Spirit is active when the gospel is proclaimed, and because the gospel proclamation is rooted in the biblical witness, the Bible is inspired. See John 20 for John's rationale for writing his gospel.

Authority

The discussion of authority is unsatisfying here in this first chapter. Authority, I think, must be tied to the notion of Apostolicity. Why? Ultimately we are claiming for the Bible the authority of God. But we have to be careful how we do that. One easy, conventional way to give the Bible divine authority is to simply say that God, in effect, wrote it. Yes, humans were the means, but the words are God's. (One thinks of old paintings of an evangelist at work, with an angel reaching over his shoulder to guide his hand as he writes.) But God doesn't seem to have worked this way, and this is not the way Lutherans have tended to attribute to the Bible divine authority (except in their weaker moments – e.g. the LCMS throughout much of its history.)

Jesus gives the apostles the great commission to go into the all the world making disciples – baptizing and teaching. It's no coincidence that Jesus begins this famous passage with the words: "all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me." Jesus here delegates his authority to the disciples/apostles – the witnesses of his crucifixion and resurrection. The scriptures of the New Testament fall under this authority.

The early church used as a central criterion for inclusion in

the canon of the NT the apostolic origin of each given book. All of the books of the NT are attributed to one of the disciples/apostles, with the exceptions of the gospel of Mark (a disciple of Peter) and Luke-Acts (written by a disciple of Paul). (These exceptions are significant for our time as scholars discover that some of the writings attributed to Paul, for example, were probably not written by him. They are, nonetheless, clearly influenced by his theology and belong to the school of his thought, and thus derive their apostolicity/authority in that way.)

Something must be said now, though, for the Lutheran understanding of apostolicity, whence I suggest the scriptures derive their authority. This, I think, is the proper way to tie in the Lutheran hermeneutic to the question of authority (something, to be fair, that the author of the first chapter of OBF tried to do, though in my mind unsuccessfully). Luther claimed that the criterion for apostolicity was not merely that the apostles wrote or said something, but that a writing or teaching conveyed the gospel (i.e. inculcated Christ – “Christum treiben” are his German words) in an unadulterated way. So his 1522 statement: “Whatever does not teach Christ is not apostolic, even though St. Peter or St. Paul does the teaching. Again, whatever preaches Christ would be apostolic, even if Judas, Annas, Pilate, and Herod were doing it.” (Martin Luther, Preface to the Epistles of St. James and St. Jude.)

Thus, the Bible is authoritative because it is apostolic, that is, it teaches/proclaims what the apostles taught/proclaimed when they were doing what they were supposed to be doing – what Christ commissioned and authorized them to do (inculcate Christ.)

What about the Old Testament? I would suggest that the Old Testament derives its authority in a similar way to that of the

New Testament: from Jesus. Because he used it as a source for his proclamation, so do we (See for example Luke chapters 4 and 24). The apostles, following Jesus' example and operating under his delegated authority, also used the OT as a source for their proclamation. (See Acts 8 for the story of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch.) And in both cases the thrust of the interpretation was to show that everything God had done previously among the people of Israel was leading up to God's ultimate activity in Jesus Christ. Thus the OT too is authoritative because it is apostolic.

The Formula of Concord (Epitome 1) referenced above uses the category "prophetic" with regard to the OT's authority and "apostolic" for the NT. I would nevertheless prefer to subordinate the prophetic notion to the apostolic one for Christians. Would [did?] Luther say for prophecy something similar to what he said for apostolicity – at least so far as we Christians are concerned: "Whatever leads to Christ is prophetic"? Prophecy without Christ cannot stand on its own for Christians. An example from Luther's writings will help to illustrate this point. Certainly Luther regarded Moses as a prophet, and the giving of the Ten Commandments as God's word. But they are not God's word for us Christians. They are not binding on us. (See his "How Christians Should Regard Moses," LW 35:164ff) It is rather Moses' example of faith that Luther finds compelling, and faith for Luther, as we know, always means trusting God's promise of mercy, fulfilled in Christ.

Further ideas to be developed/included with special reference to AC V:

1. A more explicit discussion of the notion of revelation is needed. This hasn't played much of a role in the above thoughts (or in OBF ch. 1, though there is a bit in ch. 2), except perhaps implicitly. It seems to me that in

discussions of the nature of the Bible, revelation is usually subordinate to the question of authority (the Bible is authoritative because it is/contains God's revelation to us). But from the Lutheran perspective, any discussion of revelation in the Bible must hinge on Jesus Christ as God's ultimate self-revelation. (Here Luther's comparison of the scriptures to the Bethlehem manger is helpful. We go to the Bible, as the shepherds went to the manger, to meet the Christ-child.)[EHS responds (couldn't resist helping Chris out here): Bob Bertram taught his students to be suspicious of "revelation-theology." One chapter in his recently published book is a full-blown critique of "revelationism." Revelation-theology implies that the sinner's dilemma is insufficient information about God. So if God reveals to the sinner this missing information, then the sinner's problem is solved. Thus all revelation is basically Good News. It fills in the empty spots.

But that's not the biblical view of a sinner's dilemma. The Reformers discovered that the problem was much worse than ignorance about God. The sinner's dilemma is "enmity against God." God is the enemy. Whatever sinners do know or perceive about God, they oppose it. They want to be the captains of their own souls. More information—even from God—is no help for sinners doing battle with God.

If we want to use the term revelation, then we need to follow St. Paul's lead. God runs two (not just one) revelation operations, Paul claimed. And in each operation two things get exposed—one about God, one about us. So four exposures, all told. See Romans 1:16-18 for details. One revelation exposes us as sinners and God as our lethal critic. The other revelation exposes God-in-Christ with mercy for sinners, which eventually "reveals" a forgiven

sinner trusting Christ, the revelation of faith.

That's the Lutheran way to talk about revelation. OBF doesn't do that.]

2. The Bible is not a means of grace. (Was the manger?) Nowhere do the confessions make this claim. It is rather the source and norm for the means of grace, namely, our proclamation of the gospel and administration of the sacraments. But it is enough (*satis est* – see AC VII) for the Bible to be the source and norm of our proclamation. It's the well, but not the water; the manger, but not the baby.
3. I have long thought that AC V articulates a very specific, and very limited (by which word I mean no disparagement) understanding of the work of the Holy Spirit. It seems to me that the Lutheran reformers see the proper (only?) work of the Holy Spirit to be the working of faith in those who hear the gospel. Some folks at one of our synod's theological conferences reacted strongly to this assertion when I presented it several years ago. They didn't want to limit the Holy Spirit. But is it not enough that the Holy Spirit works faith in the promises of Jesus Christ? What else matters?

Chris Repp

Luther's Theology of the Cross

and its Relevance for South Asia.

Colleagues,

This week amidst world-wide fiscal crisis [remember: “crisis” is the Greek word for “judgment”], a book review about Luther’s theology and Asia. Is that relevant? You decide.

Remembering also that the Best News for facing God’s “crisis” is God’s “Christos,”

(His) Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder

Christ as Sacrament and Example. Luther’s Theology of the Cross and its Relevance for South Asia.

By Jhakmak Neeraj Ekka

Minneapolis: Lutheran Univ. Press

2007 217 pp., paper, \$15.00

The two-line title says it all. Luther’s theology of the cross is indeed relevant for South Asia (India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal and Bhutan). Christ-as-Sacrament and Christ-as-Example are the author’s code words for the center of Luther’s theology of the cross. In that cross-theology Christ-as-Sacrament designates God’s mercy-move to sinners in Christ-crucified. Christ-as-Example calls such forgiven sinners into the world as “little Christs,” a favored term of Luther’s.

The South Asian context is also a two-faceted reality. One is “massive poverty: a pervasive reality.” The other is “Multi-

religiosity: a distinctive characteristic of South Asia.”

Right at the outset Ekka tells us: “We defend the thesis that it is in the affirmation of Luther’s theology of the cross, with its exclusive claims of God’s final revelation in the vulnerability of the cross of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, one is able to be truly open to the other faith as well as become genuinely concerned for the poor people.” (22)

The path for the project is this. 1) The Context Delineated. A survey of the world of South Asia and a survey of the theology of the cross from Biblical times to the modern period. 2) Ekka’s own understanding and presentation of Luther’s theology of the cross. 3) The present debate—a broad spectrum—in interpreting Luther’s theology of the cross and where Ekka takes his place in that debate. 4) M.M.Thomas and Aloysius Pieris—two eminent South Asian theologians and their theologies of the cross. Coming to closure, Ekka’s own construction in chapter 5: The theology of the cross amidst many religions and many poor. And finally 6) The markers of a South Asian theology of the cross, concluding in Ekka’s constructive proposal: Theology of the cross as a “Theology of the Way.”

Chapter 4 is Ekka’s dialogue with two classic South Asian theologians, M.M. Thomas (Protestant) and Aloysius Pieris (Roman Catholic). He values their work, but finds their respective versions of cross-theology “not good enough” when measured by Christ-as-Sacrament and Christ-as-Example, the two anchor points of Luther’s theology of the cross.

For Thomas “humanization” is the code word for the good news of Christ’s cross. With help from Bonhoeffer’s “Christ the man for others,” Thomas’s “understanding of Christ’s New Humanity based on the resurrection of Christ led him to assert the presence of Christ’s transforming power in secular movements and religious

traditions [in India].”

Measured by Luther’s cross-theology, says Ekka, Thomas overvalues human action by moving it into the realm of “Christ-as-sacrament,” God’s redemption project to bring lost children (aka sinners) home. Under Luther’s “sacrament” rubric –God’s mercy-act to and for sinners—it is Christ and Christ alone who exercises this specific “transforming power.” Luther finds all “secular movements”— and even “religious traditions among Christians!” yes, even “humanizing” Christian religious traditions—incapable of such sacramental power, and surely not automatically so.

With reference to Luther’s other touchstone, Thomas doesn’t appropriate “Christ-as-Example” radically and fully enough even with “his unrelenting stress on humanization.” Thomas’s Indian dialog-partners were the educated elite of contemporary Hinduism, the establishment voices in Brahman culture. With reference to the vast population of “truly oppressed communities of his country, namely, Dalit and tribal communities, . . . wronged and marginalized for centuries, Thomas is unable to speak powerfully on their behalf, about the injustice often inflicted upon them by those who profess to represent them.” (115) In newly emerging “Dalit theology,” an expanding voice among Indian Christians, Thomas is not seen as an ally. He valued Hinduism too highly and didn’t address the “serious issue of Hinduism’s religious apartheid,” which places “Dalits, tribals, fisher folk, etc.” into permanent chains of nobody-ness. That is the very opposite of humanization.

Christ-as-Example in Luther’s cross-theology is not merely the “man for others,” as Bonhoeffer tells us. Christ is the “man for ALL others,” millions of nobodies everywhere. Also in India

Considerably farther “left” on today’s spectrum of South Asia’s

Christian theology is Aloysius Pieris, Roman Catholic, a Sri Lankan Jesuit priest. His is a radical liberation theology, going well beyond the Latin Americans who taught us the term decades ago. In order for “the church IN Asia to be the church OF Asia” (Pieris’ mantra) he intensifies and Asian-izes liberation theology’s “option for the poor” into a “radical option for the poor.” He rallies us to two “signature phrases”—the “Calvary of Asian poverty” and the “Jordan of Asian Religions.”

The “Calvary of Asian poverty” designates the crucifixion of the poor in Asia, just as was true of Jesus in Jerusalem. And in both cases at the hands of the rich and powerful whose God is Mammon. Mammon and Mammon-worshippers—the power center as never before of today’s global capitalism—constitute THE enemy in Pieris’ cross-theology. Therefore in the light of Asia’s overwhelming poverty [aka Calvary], Pieris proclaims “the hard gospel demand for renunciation, ‘denying oneself,’ the ‘taking up the cross,’ as the absolute requirement of true discipleship.” (119)

The “Jordan of Asian Religions” links Pieris’ theology to Jesus at the Jordan. In accepting John’s baptism at the Jordan Jesus “identified with the religious poor,” discovered his own “prophetic asceticism,” the “point of departure for his own prophetic ministry.” The Jordan-parallel in Asia for the “two streams” intersecting at Jesus’ baptism (prophetic asceticism and the religious poor) is the “twofold spiritualities of the monks and the peasants in Asia.” Though these two spiritualities are specific to Asian contexts, they reach far beyond. He calls them “the metacosmic spirituality of the monks and the cosmic spirituality of the peasants.”

In Pieris’s reading of Jesus, from baptism to Calvary he struggles against but one enemy, “mammon with all tis

principalities and powers.” The agenda for the church, to be the church OF Asia, is “to demolish mammon that stands against the liberation of the people and hence against the Kingdom of God.”(123)

Ekka concludes “Pieris interprets the cross as planted on Calvary by ‘the money-polluted religiosity of his day,’ helped by ‘a foreign colonial power.’ Thus for him, the cross exclusively refers to the empowerment of the poor for the one and only purpose of liberation.” In Luther’s cross-theology the message is quite different. At Calvary “God was in Christ reconciling the world unto himself, not counting trespasses [of both the rich and the poor], but bestowing on them the very righteousness of God.” Pieris has no antennae for Calvary as an event that changes God’s relationship with Asian sinners, nor with sinners of any age or context. Christ-as-sacrament (understood as Ekka hears Luther proclaiming it) has no place at all in Pieris’s program. Christ-as-example is the whole story. But even that limps in Pieris’s cross-theology.

For Christ’s unique “:example,” where Christ is exemplary indeed, is precisely his life and work and word as God’s “sacrament” of rescue at the divine-human interface. So by ignoring, even negating, Christ’s sacramental self—his reconciling sinners to God — Pieris (unwittingly?) also downgrades Christ’s exemplary self “cosmically,” and, yes, “metacosmically.” Pieris’s Christ-as-example with no Christ-as-sacrament is shriveled—even as example.

Ekka’s shows us in his own constructive proposal how Pieris could REALLY be radical if he rediscovered Christ-as-sacrament in the paradigm of Luther’s cross-theology. In similar fashion he shows us how M.M.Thomas could have a more expansive program of “humanization,” were he too to exploit Luther’s Christ-as-Sacrament, where the blood was shed “for ALL.” This is the

unique “universalism” of Christ-as-sacrament, and from this Christic universalism (for all), Thomas too could have a Christ-as-example “for ALL others,” embracing also the nobodies that Thomas never quite got to.

In conclusion Ekka takes the pregnant Indian religious term “marga” (the way) and links it to THE WAY, a favored term in the NT for the Gospel as Christ’s own “way” into the world, into ALL the world. His final sentences are: “An Asian theology of the cross will take shape in daily encounter with and confession of Christ the way and draw believers to the way the Savior lived and died. The proclamation and practice of this Way . . . promise true Christian identity and relevance in South Asia. Indeed, the theology of the cross is the theology of the way.”(180)

I think that there is even more in Luther’s cross-theology than Ekka has yet mined for his project. E.g., the centrality of promise and the role of faith. But this he has solidly documented: Luther’s cross-theology is very good news for God’s people living in South Asia.

Bush, speaking on the economic chaos

Colleagues,

I couldn’t resist.

Peace and joy!

Ed Schroeder

This morning on my computer screen:

October 11, 2008

Bush, speaking on the economic chaos for the 21st time out of the past 26 days, said Friday that the government's rescue program was aggressive enough and big enough to work. "We can solve this crisis and we will," he pledged.

Don't believe him.

"Krisis" is the Greek word for "judgment." The first time that word appears in the NT, right from the git-go in Matt. 5:21, it's talking about "God's krisis." Not a krisis that God has, but a krisis that God inflicts. God is the "kritees," THE judge, the critic, doing the krisis, making the critique. Throughout the NT there are umpteen references in the same format, many of them about the "day of krisis." Judgment day is the day God settles accounts. But you don't have to wait till the last day of world history. God's judgment day is every day.

In popular Christian piety we regularly deceive ourselves by "postponing" Judgment Day till THAT day way at the end. And that is a big mistake. Jesus said so to his contemporaries. More than once. When Jesus weeps over Jerusalem, it's because their Judgment Day is happening on that very day—and they are blind to it. Postponing Judgment Day to history's last day is to guarantee that the verdict on the Final Day will be thumbs down.

In one sense, nothing really new happens on the "final" Judgment Day. THAT final one will "only" give full exposure to the fact and the truth of all God's prior krisis-days throughout history—with individuals and with nations. On THAT day even the folks blind to all prior judgment days will finally see. So back to today, under the rubric, oft repeated in the Letter to the

Hebrews, "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts."

Today God is the critic behind the crisis in the world economy. The economist Adam Smith's "invisible hand" is indeed in the mix, and "Boy, is he mad!" That hand is being placed right smack on our posteriors—with a smack and a whack. If we don't hear his voice, can we at least hear and feel his whack?

Nobody in the public arena—and not very many in churchly voices I've heard—seems to notice that voice or that whack. Surely not our national president. But it's not just he. He speaks for the nation. His "bully pulpit" is preaching to the choir. We all believe the sermon he preaches. God is not in the mix on this one. Both presidential candidates preach the same sermon: "We can solve the crisis, and we will." We will cope with God our critic by our smarts, our know-how, our capital infusions. If a \$7 billion bandaid won't quite do it to get God to back off, we'll find some other bandaid. The Bible's word for that is blindness. And for those who claimed that they were not blind about God-stuff, Jesus had biting words: "Because you say you see, your blindness gets even blinder."

"We can solve the crisis, and we will" can only be said by a president—born-again Christian that he may be—who doesn't believe, doesn't see, God the critic in the mix. Yes, he speaks for our nation. That is our national faith, ritually expressed as the religion of God Bless America, but operationally expressed as "We can solve the crisis, and we will."

Whoever proclaims that, doesn't have a clue about what's really going on in the USA. Doesn't have a clue that the same words that God scribbled on the wall for Nebuchadnezzar to read as his empire crumbled under his feet, are now scribbled on our wall, as Wall Street's empire (=our own) crumbles: "You have been

weighed and found wanting.”

No, WE won’t solve it until we confront THE critic. Which, to be sure, is at first an even more unpleasant prospect than waiting for the next Dow-Jones numbers to come in.

So long as we keep grabbing for bandaids—and do so because our official and elected diagnosticians and therapists (our “doctors”) see the crisis as “merely” a money matter—we are indeed lost. Rescue package? Hah! Rescue from the real krisis? No way! “Solving” comes from the same Latin root as “saving.” The vocabulary of theology –rescue, save, solve, restore, “faith” in the market–covers the front pages, but it’s lost-cause theology. Like prescribing bandaids to cope with cancer. No rescue package is available at the Federal Reserve Bank –or all the banks in the world–when God is the critic administering the krisis. When God is our nemesis. And he is. It’s that simple.

So back to Luther’s counsel in the War against the Turks. Back to Lincoln’s action midpoint in the Civil War. Call to repentance. Not a monetary turn-around, but a God-turn-around. But what good would that do for our “real” problem? some will always say. Ay, there’s the rub. What is the REAL problem? And if a “Call to Repentance” that both of these ancient worthies advocated seems too radical at first, it at least gets God’s name into the conversation. If the US president can say without danger “God bless America,” why not simply ask: Is God indeed blessing America? That would shift the conversation, as Christians see it, to a deeper level, to a level where, if we did find a “solution,” it would surely be salutary back up where all the current hub-bub prevails.

Why doesn’t Obama (or McCain or Nader or the other third party candidates) say this? “God is clearly not blessing America these

days. And if he's not blessing us, what are the other options? Biblically, there's only one. The opposite of blessing is cursing. Its synonym is damning. I missed it a couple of months ago with that flap about my pastor. It's now perfectly clear. Pastor Wright was right. God's handwriting is on the wall. Same message that Nebuchadnezzar got. I didn't see it then, sorry to say. Nor did many others of our leaders. But "today" the handwriting is on the wall at Wall Street and throughout the world of global capitalism, plain for everyone to see: God is not blessing America. God's doing the very opposite.

In Crossings lingo, the current national analysis is stuck at Level One diagnosis, the EXTERNAL ouch that hurts—yes, hurts bad!

Beneath that diagnosis is D-2, the not-so-visible cause of the ouch, the INTERNAL alternate-faith of money-trusters hyped by a capitalist society. The Biblical label for that alternate faith is "love of money." Note the scramble to restore our "confidence" in the market. In the market! The market is the object of our fear—and the hoped-for solver (=savior) from that Market-fear. Now there's an offer! Take a closer look at "conFIDENCE." It has the word FAITH right smack in the middle. Faith in the market is flat out trusting a false god. Yes, that is a no-no. Already at Sinai God announced that worshiping phony gods will not make True God happy. Even pragmatically, we're seeing that it won't work.

Worse even than that is the ETERNAL level of diagnosis, the God-problem at the root, the ultimate crisis-causer, God the super-critic whose "invisible hand" in the mix makes this "little" monetary crisis into a super-crisis.

To say yes to that full-scale fruit-shoot-root diagnosis of our ills is step one of repentance: God, you're right, we're wrong.

Step two is the turn-around from that admission, that lethal analysis, leaving us confronting the cosmic critic with no cover to shield us. Turn around to what? Jesus' opening mantra (Mark 1:15) was simple: "Turn around and trust the Good News." And what, pray tell, is that Good News, Jesus? "It's me."

With all due respect, Jesus sir, how on earth will that change anything in the meltdown we're experiencing? "You'll only find out if you try it," he says. "If you accept my offer to turn around and trust me, but do so because you really trust the goodies that you hope will come down the pipeline, then you're neither repenting nor trusting me. Sorry, that's the way it is."

One of you out there has an e-address "Blindfaith." It might be a quote from Luther. Doesn't sound very promising, but at root it is. "Blindfaith" is indeed blind to what the future consequences might be for what we call real life, but it is NOT blind, it is open-eyed in "seeing Jesus," hearing his invitation to "Turn around. Trust me," and then doing exactly that.

When someone asked Luther what "real" benefit repentance would have militarily as the Holy Roman Empire faced Suleiman the Magnificent in 1529, he said this: "For those who repent, God is no longer their enemy, but their ally. So here at the gates of Vienna, it would no longer be God AND Suleiman outside the wall inflicting crisis, but "just" Suleiman and his 600,000 soldiers. When he loses his divine ally, he's no longer invulnerable. The Suleiman-problem is then solvable."

In 1529 it was a military crisis. In 2008 a monetary one. When God pulls his invisible hand off of the crisis-lever, it's solvable. In the crucified and risen Messiah, Christians claim, God has done exactly that. Where all might that lead our frazzled world? No advance blueprint is available. The promise comes from the blueprint-maker. He's the one we hang our hearts

on, not the blueprint. Yet the promise coming from the Promissor is that as the blueprint unfolds, Christ-trusters can “count it all joy,” even if some of it proves to be very sticky. And others standing within earshot of these rejoicers can get in on the goodies too.

For Crossings matrix junkies—

Stage 4 (Good news to trump the level 3 bad news): Christ’s cross and resurrection is God trumping God’s own criticism.

Stage 5 (to trump level 2): Parallel to the sweet-swap of #4 is the internal swap away from trusting the gods of the market, who can’t even save themselves, to trusting the Savior who now has death-proof credentials in the savings business.

Stage 6 (to trump #1, back out into the “real” world): Christ-trusters practice their “count it all joy” inventively and ad hoc as they carry their cross alongside their neighbors, the Sisyphus-rock -pushers. As they grunt and groan in life together, they tell their rock-pushing neighbors why their daily life is no longer pushing rocks, but carrying a cross – as Sherman Lee showed us so winsomely a couple weeks ago in his ThTh post.

And the Wall Came Tumbling Down

Colleagues,

Sherman Lee’s ThTh post last week was brilliant. From some of

the comments coming back to Sherm, I wonder if it may have been too brilliant. Blinding. At the very least so replete with shoptalk from the Crossings club that folks not yet having signed up got something, but didn't (yet) get IT. Sherm tells me that one of his colleagues on the job, having read his text, responded: "So, in a nutshell, just remember to keep a spiritual connection throughout all of this (mess)."

Well, yes, spiritual, but that's not yet getting to the "Saver" Sherm wanted to present, a Saver for Sherm and that very colleague too—right there in the shop—as the whole outfit faced Losses. For as the Wall (of THE Street) was tumbling down, so was theirs. Yes, on the very day they were talking "the primary identity" of their mega-mega-company was being sold off for survival.

So I'm going to be the old professor and walk/talk you through it again. Of course, I may add an item or two. If for no other reason than that this week in the church calendar there's another special day, September 29—St. Michael and All Angels—with its own bizarre Biblical text [Revelation 12:7-12] to add to the mix. You may want to read those 6 verses before you go any further.

Back to Sherm's ThTh last week.

He was doing a self-crossing. Taking the Christmas story from Luke (of all texts!) and laying it over his own daily work in "Goliath Financial Services" as the invincible wall of Wall Street comes tumbling down—and GFS does too.

His self-crossing might have been more obvious if Sherm had added a fourth "L" to the topic line: "Lucre, Linus, LEE and Luke – Crossing the Current Financial Crises."

In the Crossings paradigm Bob Bertram bequeathed to us for

“crossing our world with the Word of God” it’s a three-stage process. #1 TRACKING a slice-of-life from the world we live in. #2 Getting our GROUNDING in a specific Biblical text, a Biblical slice-of-life, you might say. And then #3 CROSSING, bringing those two slices together, criss-crossing them [Btw, the ancient meaning of criss-cross—once Christ-cross—was to “mark something with Christ’s cross.”] More precisely, lay the Biblical slice-of-life across the personal one and see what you get.

So following his teacher Sherm started with TRACKING his world of daily work—and not just “it” or “them” but Sherm himself, his own slice-of-life at GFS.

- this market crash
- collective psyche (at GFS)
- where has the future gone
- water cooler conversations
- belief within the industry
- nothing is certain anymore
- anxious, tired, exhausted . . . on edge a lot
- catatonia
- the market runs on emotion
- it’s about confidence, built on stability
- problem runs deeper than we’ve been thinking
- markets have been overvalued . . . not in an academic, technical sense
- but rather in the emotional sense of us overestimating our own health
- like dying of multiple cancers
- keep thinking: if we can lick the last one, we’ll be perfectly fine
- emotional quakes
- after-shocks which accelerate the downward spiral of confidence
- we have the makings of extreme fear, loss, doubt.

[Goldie-oldies in the Crossings community will divine that Sherm's choice of terms, images, metaphors as he goes about this self-tracking is already tinted by the language of where he'll be taking us next, St. Luke's Christmas story. But how on earth can he get from Wall Street to Bethlehem—from the mess at the tip of Manhattan to the manged Messiah in Bethlehem? Read on.]

So much for Sherm's TRACKING.

Then he moves to phase #2, GROUNDING. And he takes us to the first-ever published Crossings piece Bob Bertram wrote, "A Christmas Crossing." It's a show and tell on how to do Biblical text study when you read the text through the lenses of diagnosis and prognosis. Bob used these medical terms as a pun in their ancient Greek meaning. Like this: diagnosis is "God seeing through us," and prognosis is "God seeing us through." In Lutheran lingo, that's law and promise. So the "Crossings method" for reading Biblical texts is bifocal. You use two lenses—one looking for diagnostic stuff, one for prognostic stuff, one for the bad news, one for the good news.

And that's where Sherm then takes us. However . . . He doesn't make it exactly easy for himself, nor for us readers, in that he tells the GROUNDING story in two formats. One is Luke's own version. The other is Luke's story via Linus in "Charlie Brown's Christmas." Sherm can't resist pulling in the Linus version because in his own childhood days and as "young adult" too he watched that TV special umpteen times and was "awestruck" by it. All that was a segment of his self-tracking, long before "at age 23 . . . I was baptized."

[There are other places where Sherm makes us readers "work" to keep up with him. I'm thinking of his occasional "sidebar" sorties into stuff that does indeed relate to his storyline, but

it's not so obvious unless you know Sherm. E.g., his Batman sortie, his sidebar about the OCD affliction of the American media, his move to Monty Python.]

Bertram parsed Luke 2 with three simple diagnostic terms going down, down, down. Who's got the problem in this text? The shepherds. What's their problem? Three-fold-deep, deeper, deepest.

Level one: NIGHT. They're benighted. In the dark—about lots of things. “Thick” darkness.

Deeper still, level two: FEAR. The Fearful Visitor and, yes, mega-fear (Luke's actual Greek for that “sore afraid” rendering we've all often wondered about. Sherm did too.) It signals a God-problem, not just a “human” problem.

Deepest of all, level three: LOST. Not simply that they've gotten lost, strayed away from their own (capital S) shepherd, but even worse than that, namely, God, the cosmic shepherd, has lost them. That is a major motif later on in Luke's Gospel, as he alone among the four evangelists offers the parables (chap. 15) of owners losing a sheep, losing a coin, concluding with the whopper-loss of a father losing both his sons.

After which Bob reads the text again looking through the prognosis-lens.

Good news for level three: a SAVIOR for the lost (along with all their losses).

Good news for level two: JOY. Fear trumped by Joy.

Good news for level one: GLORIFYING. Formerly benighted shepherds now angels of God's own glow-ry in the thick darkness that still persists.

Sherm uses all these key terms as he moves into the Luke/Linus GROUNDING material. But he can't resist sliding into phase-three CROSSING as soon as he gets started. He's crossing his slice-of-life with Luke's slice-of-life right from the git-go as he walks/talks us through the original. Like the double-helix in DNA, they're interwoven. He can't pull them apart for separate treatment. That's not bad.

NIGHT

"In this story, I am one of the shepherds . . . a white collar worker in the distant reaches of an office . . . sometimes at night." Even more, my "whole world is upside down . . . disappearing into the night. Almost as if [it] were never there." "Gone, destroyed, no longer reliable. My own behaviors—reflecting stability and confidence—shot to hell as I revert to bad habits, becoming more irritable and short-tempered, searching for a calm port in these financial storms. I worry about every asset—money and time—and how can I provide for my family."

FEAR

Yes, a frightful visitor has barged in. Yes, sore afraid. "Everything I trusted . . . poof!" "A different kind of fear, a different kind of accountability." [Sherm is already beginning to segue to the deepest level.]

LOST

"The angst I feel is not just fiscal responsibility for my family and community..." It's bigger than that. "Trust only in myself . . . my judgment to the exclusion of God, I no longer trust in God. It's no longer just my problem. God has lost me—my heart and my soul."

[So in Luke's distinctive telling of the Jesus story, God too "has a problem." He's lost his kids to other families, other

owners. How to get them back? Technical term for what's needed is "re(d)emption," regaining ownership, getting the kids back into the family business. Sherm peers again at the text with the prognosis lens.]

Enter the Mangered Messiah.

Sherm continues his double helix entwining as he simultaneously does GROUNDING (Luke's good news for the Bethlehem shepherds) and CROSSING that immediately to his own calling, his "keeping watch over his own flocks—at Goliath and at home—by night."

So first it's Luke's #1 prognosis term SAVIOR.

For the Bethlehem shepherds: "In the city of David a Savior for the Losers who is Christ the Lord."

For shepherd Sherm: "God's response to God's losing me is to become one of us." And then he spells that out all the way to Christ's cross, as God's sweet-swaps Sherm's losses for Christ's gains. Debts exchanged for assets, "balancing the ledgers of hearts, minds, souls and bodies. It's The Story intertwined with our own stories in our here and now." Moving on . . .

Prognosis level 2. JOY trumps fear as "we are invited to . . . trust God's generous payment of our debts . . . God's gift of settling our accounts." Sherm has but one crisp paragraph on this one. But he says it all—"hanging our hearts" on this Savior, replacing the fear-full hearts hanging on other saviors gone bankrupt, punning his way to "the imprint on our currency of 'In God We Trust.'"

And finally prognosis level 3, his last two paragraphs. "After seeing [the SAVIOR for the LOST] and believing [= JOY trumping FEAR], what do the shepherds do? They return to their workplaces

and daily lives—to their regular programming as it were—but changed. They GLORIFY AND PRAISE God, doing their shepherdly duties but adding another task to their to-do list: to be messengers, that is, angels, of God’s Good News.” Then Sherm tells how that can and does happen from his desk at Goliath. “Continue the struggle” but with a twist. “The dark night of analysis paralysis . . . the dialogue of despair . . . replaced by hope and confidence of God paying my God-debt for me” and how that “opens new dimensions in my work relationships.” Sherm’s final sentence is: “I’ve never been a soapbox evangelist. [Rather] leavening existing relationships is how God has blessed me with evangelistic opportunities.” Such as his colleague asking him this past Monday if his own (strange?) “attitudes and behavior” at work were something about his “spirituality.” Voila! Another “evangelistic opportunity” for him to proceed with Luke, Linus and Lee’s shepherd/angel agenda “glorifying and praising God for all the things that [Sherm] has seen and heard.”

I intended to add a P.S. of my own on the wall(s) of Wall Street come tumbling down and cross that with this week’s St. Michael & All Angels text. But this much is enough already. For a hint of the GROUNDING segment that might be in the mix GO to the Crossings website <www.crossings.org> Put “St. Michael” into the internal Google system on the page and see what you get. Foundational for all of them is this one:

<https://crossings.org/archive/bob/SPIRITUALITYISFORANGELS.pdf>

Maybe next week. What new humpty-dumpty great falls yet await us? Back in the days of Crossings semester-long courses, we had one on that Revelation text about St. Michael et al. The course title was “Apocalypse Now.” At that time the focus was Vietnam, when the walls of Wall Street had no cracks. Or so we thought.

But our vision was myopic. Now we're in two more Asian wars.

But these, so some tell us, we are winning. Yet it's NYC implosions, not Baghdad or Kabul explosions, that are bringing us to our knees. If only they indeed would do that! We might yet be saved. Might get the genuine "rescue" package, the bail-out that works. But it depends 100% on who the deity is before whom our knees bend. Currently a 700 billion dollar golden-parachute (golden calf?) is the one we are encouraged to trust. 700 billion—that number itself is super-natural, ungraspable, infinite, incomprehensible. Once upon a time those adjectives applied only to the deity. Perhaps they still do. It is Deity-Dollar before whom we bow in these desperate days. If the U.S. Congress would only give us access to Deity-Dollar in its infinite sum, we would be saved! [Talk about need for change!]

But Deity-Dollar is a false God. The True One, the Deity de facto in charge, remained the Unknown God among the other gods worshipped at Mars Hill in Athens in ancient days. And so it is today "on the Hill" in Washington DC. I have not yet heard that True God mentioned in all the media madness—surely not by the elected makers and shakers. And not much, so far as I've heard, by the parsons of our land either. Blindness appears to be endemic—and epidemic. Sherm's view—America's economic crisis is a God-problem—is clearly a minority one. And he never went to a seminary, though I know that once he was tempted.

Even so, and because of the Mangered Messiah—and St. Michael too—and all his shepherd-angels,

Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder

P.S. After Sherm OK'd the text above, he added this:

A teaser about the Crossings Conference: Pastor Robin Morgan is

leading the “Pop Culture roundtable session.” If all goes well, she’ll use this essay as a launching pad to start the discussion – and the discussion will continue after the Conference ends, in the form of a blog hosted by Robin and Sherman.