

# **Preaching Justice, Doing Mercy: The Gospel in the Public Square Can we, should we, and did we ever distinguish clearly between the vocations of preachers, prophets, and partisans?**

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**Can we, should we, and did we ever distinguish clearly between the vocations of preachers, prophets, and partisans?**

**Institute of Liturgical Studies**

**25 March 2008**

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Thanks for coming, and as always, for the work you and your congregations and communities do in the way of nurturing and sending such smart, good young people to VU and other such schools. I'm your beneficiary, and so is the church and the world.

Given what I'm going to talk about, I should begin with one piece of humor about politics and politicians and another about prophets. The trouble with political jokes, of course, is that too many of them get elected. Then again, admirable politicians, and there are a few, have been known to be funny. Adlai

Stevenson once said of the complexities involved in his line of work, "A lie is an abomination unto the Lord, and a very present help in trouble."

Prophets were notoriously humorless characters. You'd have never, ever wanted Jeremiah, Obadiah, or Ezekiel at a party. I didn't have many prophet jokes in my files, just a one-liner that says, "Atheism is a non-prophet religion," and something about a kid who supposedly explained that Elijah poured water on the altar in the contest with Baal prophets because he wanted to make gravy with his sacrifice. If you Google, "a prophet walks into a bar," you get a raft of jokes about the prophet Muhammed, and I didn't want a fatwa against me, so I closed down the screen.

Actually, one of the issues I want to address is something that makes the following story at least somewhat amusing. So, one piece of alleged humor:

*Mildred, the church gossip and self-appointed monitor of the church's morals, couldn't keep from sticking her nose in other people's business. Most members did not approve of her vigilante activities but feared her enough to maintain their silence. She made a mistake, however, when she accused Frank, a new member, of being an irresponsible drunk after she saw his old pickup parked in front of the town's only tavern one afternoon. She emphatically told Frank (and several others) that everyone who saw it there knew full well what he was doing. Frank, a man of few words, merely listened, looked Mildred in the eye, turned and walked away. He didn't explain, defend, or deny. Later that evening, Frank quietly parked his pickup in front of Mildred's house... Walked home... And left it there all night.*

In any case, LITURGY AND THE PUBLIC SQUARE is this year's ILS

theme, and in this break-out session, Preaching and the Public Square, or The Gospel in the Public Square. . . I hope to have conversation with you, not talk for the whole time. I have prepared a handout, which I'll send around later, and I have something of a presentation to precede both discussion and handouts. It begins with a confession that's also a cautionary tale.

My own politics are somewhat left of center. I generally favor regulation over deregulation. I think social security is a good idea, not a national disgrace. I would vote for a health care system that assumes everyone, not only the rich, should get the best care we know how to give. In 40-plus years as a voter, I have missed one presidential election (while out of state to attend a funeral), but I have only voted for two presidents that won. My family recycles everything we possibly can, I print my sermons and lectures on scrap paper, and we learned at Holden Village not to flush our toilets-unless we had to. I'm against the Iraq war, oppose the death penalty, and consider it a national obscenity that every angry person in this country who needs to express outrage seems to have an AK-47 ready to make a killing field of some workplace, school, or shopping mall. My prophets include Wendell Berry, Garrison Keillor, and David James Duncan.

I have a brother a bit younger than me who looks enough like me to be my twin. He has spent his adult life in the Marine Corps, beginning with a stint in the jungles of Vietnam and ending with retirement a year ago after a decade in Marine Corps headquarters in the Pentagon. He believes that military intervention is the quickest and best solution to most of the world's problems, that the United States was founded on conservative Christian principles, and that the right to bear arms is the most important right in this nation because it guarantees our having all the others. He decries the

encroachment of developers on lands where he loves to hunt, but he thinks global warming is a hoax perpetrated by the bad science of liberal academics. His prophets include Rush Limbaugh, G. Gordon Liddy, and pretty much everyone who works for Rupert Murdoch.

I write a bi-weekly newspaper column on a range of topics you might call "religion in the public square," and I send it via e-mail to far-flung family members. My brother quickly corrects about half of them.

We have the same mother and father and grew up in the same house, had the same confirmation teacher (our dad) and learned the faith from the same people. We both have high blood pressure, irregular heartbeats, and several other common health concerns, and we're both doing our best to survive. Neither of us wants to die any time soon, we both worry about our aging mother, and we're both puzzled and chagrined at the state of the world. And we love each other even though there are many things we can't talk about for very long.

I think my politics are better than his politics, but I know one thing for certain, that it's not the gospel, nor the faith of the body of Christ into which each of us have been baptized, that my politics are better than his, or his than mine. And I'm old-fashioned enough to believe that I have no business preaching in a gathering of the Christian assembly, when my role is to preach the gospel, that my politics are better than his or anyone else's, and that the sooner I and my fellow-partisans take over the better off we'll be. My job as preacher is NOT to run my brother out of any circle, including the church.

I'm old fashioned enough to believe that we are both hopelessly flawed and incompetent as deities and that if given the chance, each of us could and would run our own lives and the world into

some terrible ditch. If you listen closely to me or to my brother on matters of the public square, you will find in each of us a quest for justice, but also very significant doses of fear and anger at the heart of each drive for justice.

I've been part of communities where only one kind of politics was tolerated, and where the worship life of the community was designed to expose the faults of all who oppose us, to authorize our own set of opinions and solutions, and to condemn all other viewpoints. Those have invariably been communities that lived out of the law, not the gospel.

I'm old-fashioned enough to believe that my job as a preacher in the assembly is indeed to diagnose all the fear and anger and the true and shameful origins of much of our justice-seeking. However, I believe that it's not my job to diagnose someone else's sin, but my own, and to lay myself and my community, dead in our trespasses and sins, before God's mercy, there to find the crucified one already with us on our side of all that's gone wrong in the world.

But we never stay there, immobilized in death. Weekly, nay daily, we hear the crucified one say, "Take up your cross, come with me. Let's find our lives by losing them." He does NOT say, "Let's find our lives by being right about everything while all those other bozos are wrong," but instead, "let's give our lives away in service." THE CHRISTIAN FAITH AND THE CHRISTIAN LIFE ARE NOT ABOUT BEING RIGHT-WHETHER RIGHT AS LIBERALS OR RIGHT AS CONSERVATIVES-BUT ABOUT DYING, AND GIVING OUR LIVES AWAY.

Rarely has there been more public conversation in this country about the relationship of politics and religion (and by extension about the gospel) in the public square than during the current presidential campaign. And now, just in time for this session on proclamation, we have all witnessed the aftermath of

a few politically charged sermons becoming a major issue in the public square. Jeremiah Wright, Barack Obama's longtime pastor and the subject of much of this discussion right now, preached a few years ago in the Chapel of the Resurrection here at Valparaiso University. Technically, he was a speaker-for Martin Luther King Day convocation that's a part of our annual commemoration of MLK. But as some of you know, Jeremiah Wright never merely speaks. He always preaches. What he preached here at VU sounded much in the tradition of MLK himself. It was very biblical, and genuinely Christian in tone and content. It was also prophetic. It surely wasn't anti-American or paranoid (as were the now-famous "God damn America" rant and the suggestion about HIV as a white plot against blacks).

In my estimation, Jeremiah Wright has become a lightning rod because he has played the role of prophet in at least some of his public discourse. I have never attended his church though I have watched his televised worship services a few times. Most of what I've witnessed has been exhortation to live in certain ways. I know from many things written in the aftermath of Fox News and YouTube revelations, including one very informative piece by Martin Marty, that he regularly preached the gospel and did not merely present himself as a prophet. Tragically, however, no one can hear Wright's gospel any more-only his partisan denunciations and encouragement. Such is the plight of prophets and would-be prophets.

Waxing prophetic is quite different from preaching the gospel. Preachers for the most part are seminary-trained, and seminaries train preachers, not prophets. Indeed, you can't train a prophet. They just "happen." God calls them and they can't do otherwise than what they do, always at the cost of their reputations and sometimes at the cost of their lives. They're never respected in their own lands, and their stuff never gets canonized in their lifetimes. As the Bible itself says, one must

always wait a while with prophets, to see if their message (and not just their “predictions”) proves true. Only time will tell if a prophet was genuine, and all the Bible’s prophets died rejected. Nevertheless, prophecy has long been mixed up with gospel-preaching, at least the O.T. sort. Cf. the hopeful materials in Jeremiah or Isaiah-e.g., Isaiah 40-55.

Many preachers love to say that their job is “to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable.” The trick, of course, is to know the difference. But an even wiser approach, I submit, is to assume that in every listener there lives a soul both comfortable in its own rightness and afflicted with fear that even all that rightness really won’t help in the long run. Besides, we have only one message, and it’s meant for all. I needn’t afflict the comfortable. Life itself, and the brutality of the public square, will take care of that very effectively, sooner or later. We’re there with ruined hands and a crucified Christ’s love when affliction happens.

In addition, a few bullet points, in no particular order:

- When we take political stands in our preaching, or preach justice and political righteousness, we inadvertently teach self-righteousness, I believe. We let ourselves believe, and we teach others, that there are some things we and they can do about which we can say, “Well, at least for this Christ needn’t have died. Those others must repent, but not me.” In so doing, we dishonor Christ and his death. We don’t need his pathetic solution, the cross. No, we can please God and run the world by our own light, thank you.
- Claiming to know the mind of God on any controversial issue is terribly risky for several reasons. It appears to claim a rightness and righteousness that no sinner can claim, and it runs the risk of dividing the church over

something other than the gospel.

- Seeking justice is, in Lutheran terms, participation in God's left-handed work. It's a part of sinning boldly, not a part of the means of grace, which is God's right-handed work, to which preaching the gospel properly belong.
- Most of those who make issues of the so-called public square the center of their preaching and proclamation seem mostly interested in diagnosing other people's sins, and especially those that have to do with sex. To my mind, the intense energy in some church circles given over to fighting against abortion and gay marriage, for example, represents a curious preoccupation with other people's sex lives and an insistence on scrutinizing others' sins rather than one's own.
- My professional guild, namely, scholars of biblical studies, mostly produces books on politics these days. Post-colonial interpretation is all the rage. We're all against the empire. E.g., I received a recent gift: Crossan's *God & Empire: Jesus against Rome, Then & Now*. The point of so much of this is that Jesus was essentially a political figure, and the message of the New Testament is first of all political. It's there to help us cast the mighty down from their thrones and send the rich away empty. . .so we can take over, I suppose. [This is an old issue, actually. Luke's gospel faced the task of handling the charge that Jesus and his followers were tax rebels and rabble-rousing insurrectionists bent on undermining Rome. All the passion narratives have their own way of depicting what kind of "king" Jesus was. And the temptation stories in Luke and Matthew speak strongly to the misunderstanding of Jesus' messianic mission as one of conventional politics-see especially the temptation to bow to Satan in order to have the kingdoms of the world. The bread temptation is political in some ways, too, for it



seems to assume a notion that if we only had enough, the world would be fixed.]

- I suspect that my guild colleagues no longer believe in anything but justice. Indeed, many of the most prominent are agnostics (and some are merely Biblepreneurs-my term, not theirs, obviously). I suspect, too, that some colleagues in the ministry don't believe any longer that forgiveness, reconciliation, and comfort for penitent hearts are relevant. So, in an effort to talk about things that will actually make a difference in folks' lives, they exhort folks to join them in a particular stand on political matters.
- To preach as though justice and bread are the be-all and end-all of what needs to be done, especially for poor people, is to patronize the poor and treat them as less than fully human. No matter whether we are rich or poor, we are selfish, self-righteous, frightened, and dying. We all need to have law and gospel proclaimed in our hearing, so that the Spirit might call, gather, enlighten and sanctify each and all of us regardless of our economic status.
- How then should we preachers address the brothers (and sisters) of the rich man who left crumbs for Lazarus but never invited him in to dine at the table? As Jesus said, they have Moses and the prophets. If they won't listen to them, then won't listen to us either, just because we've been baptized, died with Christ and Lazarus, and been raised to a new life on the other side of baptism (Luke 16:19-31).

The story of the Temptation in Wilderness assists us in finding our role. Christ saw to the feeding of the world, the healing and protection of those who might fall from cliffs and temple pinnacles, and the Pax Christus not by the direct routes the tempter suggested, but by going the way of the cross. Instead of

changing the world, he gave his life and breathes his Spirit upon us to change us. Now, that same work, through the preaching of the gospel, is our work.

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# **Our Time For Confessing in the Philippines-The People Power Revolt**

Colleagues,

I can no longer remember how Bob Bertram and I learned about Francisco F. Claver, Roman Catholic bishop from the Philippines. Somehow we'd heard of him as a major player in the church and state conflict of the Marcos regime. Then one day during Seminex years [1974-83] he showed up at St. Louis University visiting his fellow Jesuits. Bob and I got invited to join the conversation. A friendship arose—and correspondence too. Also a couple face-to-face visits in Manila, which he refers to below, one of them with a bunch of Seminex students. Marie and I had another one—in Addis Ababa, of all places—when we were mission volunteers there (1995) and he was passing through. “I’m here in Addis,” he said on the phone. “Come on over for breakfast at the Jesuit house.” So we did. Claver, now retired and approaching his 80th birthday, was not only a major figure in the People Power movement against Marcos, but also a major voice (and actor) in the Philippine “confessing movement” in the Roman church. So Claver now shows up as prime confessor in chapter six of Bob’s book, “A Time for Confessing.” Bob titles the chapter: “A Philippine Revolution: From Patients to Agents.”

I asked Claver to do a review. He said yes. What he has now sent for ThTh posting is “sortuv a review” in, with, and under a confession of his own from that era. For more information on Claver’s wide-ranging life’s work—for half of which (40 years) he’s been a bishop—google his name.

Peace and joy!

Ed Schroeder

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## **OUR TIME FOR CONFESSING IN THE PHILIPPINES-THE PEOPLE POWER REVOLT**

*[After reading Bob Bertram’s “A Time for Confessing” and what he wrote about our confessing here in the Philippines during the “People Power Revolution” of 1986, I must admit it had never occurred to me to put our revolution on the same footing as Martin Luther’s revolt back in the sixteenth century. But the more I thought of it, the more I saw Bob was right. But later I also realized that all the other cases he cites of confessing were, read from our experience in the Philippines, akin to the “faith/ideology” problematic that had led us, in the first place, to the People Power overthrow of a dictatorial government.*

*That’s when I decided not to do the review that I was thinking of doing on Ed Schroeder’s request. Instead I would share something I’d already written on the problem of faith and ideology and how it influenced the development of the non-violent revolt of 1986. I’m reproducing here a short section of a book that Orbis Books will be putting out this Fall under the title “the Making of a Local Church”. I think it is as good a*

*summary too, put in different terms, of Bob's main thesis. Or am I sorely misreading him?*

*He (and Ed Schroeder) visited in Manila with a group of Seminex theological students in 1984, and again very briefly in 1988, and both times we had conversations that lead me to believe I am right in the conclusion I make here, to wit, that he would agree with me in placing what he wrote under the same category of "faith and ideology" that I use here.*

*"Salvo meliore iudicio," I dare to say, "stat thesis." [Pending better judgment, my thesis stands]*

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### ***Faith and Ideology***

*Marcos' New Society was a grandiose scheme to make Filipinos better than they were, to reform them and transform them into a strong nation. If that scheme was a mode of change by fiat, by force, and according to a blueprint that was wholly his, a way of social reform in the making and formulation of which there was no participation whatsoever by us who were to be changed, these little facts vitiated it from its very conception. But that wasn't the worst thing about his New Society. Non-participation and coercion are bad enough. But when they mean accepting something evil, something that was destructive of us as a people? That evil was a military dictatorship the only purpose of which was to sustain and keep Marcos and his coterie of supporters in power and to enable them to enrich themselves by all sorts of corrupt means. We in the Church had all the right-and obligation-to call it and treat it as un-Christian.*

*Something happened in 1976 that brought us to a deeper-and quite contentious-examination of how social change should be brought about. Canon Francois Houtart of Louvain University in*

Belgium conducted a month-long seminar in Baguio on “structural analysis” for social action workers in the Church. (He had already done so in a number of countries of Latin America and South Asia.) It was a way of analyzing social situations in all their dimensions: political, economic, cultural (although I would question the adequacy of what he called “cultural”) , religious. Coming at a time when we were at a loss on how to face up to the dictatorship in any significant way, it became very popular among social activists in and out of the Church.

Houtart’s structural analysis was readily accepted by the Left, widely propagated by them, as it tallied perfectly with the ideology of change of the NDF (National Democratic Front-a Communist coalition) and the revolutionary aims of the NPA (New People’s Army-the Communist Party’s armed group). Houtart himself had made no bones about its Marxist orientation. This generated within Church ranks what later was called “the faith-ideology debate”. And in essence it was a debate about how to bring change into society in ways that were more expressly Christian and not merely ideological.

Marcos’ ideology was rightist to the core, capitalistic in the worst sense, totally geared towards selfish ends: his staying on in power and, as it turned out, for profit. Against him was the Left in its various permutations: its governing body, the CPP (Communist Party of the Philippines); its armed component, the NPA; its political arm, the NDF. Allied with them was the CNL (Christians for National Liberation), ecumenical in composition, made up mostly of priests, religious, pastors and lay activists from the various Churches. They had their own blueprint of what the ideal society should be-unabashedly couched in Marxist jargon and supportive of its ideology. Thus they made no bones about the aim of their armed struggle: the setting up of the dictatorship of the proletariat. This was supposed to replace the current dictatorship of the “burgis”

(the bourgeoisie, in Marx' vocabulary), the elite classes of Philippine society which they claimed was fully supported by "clerico-fascist reactionaries" in the Church. One dictatorship was to be replaced by another: by peaceful, above-ground, parliamentary means, if at all possible; but also and simultaneously, by un-peaceful means, anti-government, underground, violent. In time violence was being touted as the only way of righting the wrongs of Philippine society as Marcos' military rule got more and more oppressive.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, it had become common to analyze Philippine society as Right, Left and Center in these terms: Right was Marcos and his supporters; Left, the Communists and their various allies; and Center, the largely undifferentiated middle that had problems with either extreme but was not organized in any meaningful way (except perhaps for the Social Democrats, a political group, left of center, that the NDF considered its rival but was not as widely spread). The situation changed with the assassination of Ninoy Aquino in 1983. It was then that the Center started to come together in some organized way. Being against the violence of either extreme, the middle groups began to coalesce in their acceptance of ANV-active non-violence-as their mode of facing up to the problems wrought on the country by Marcos' long dictatorship. (It was at this time too that John Goss and Hildegard Meyer, a husband and wife team who were on a world-wide crusade pushing ANV as a way of social reform, came to the Philippines and helped not a little to crystallize the efforts of the Center.)

The faith-ideology debate mentioned above arose from the dilemma posed by the two extremes. And the question Church people had to find an answer to: Given the need for change in society then, did one have to have a definite blueprint for reform of society in order to be able to act in a meaningful

way for change? And for that blueprinting, was it absolutely necessary to have a fully developed ideology? Or was it enough to go by the general notions of good and evil from one's faith perspective on things? If one did not go along with the two extremes, and one thought faith imperatives were not particular enough, what ideology should be developed? These were the bothersome questions for a good number of people of good will in the nebulous Center who could accept neither the Marcos regime nor his Marxist enemies.

In the murderous confrontation between Liberal Capitalism and Marxist Socialism, localized in the armed conflict between Marcos and the NDF-NPA, the questions soon came down to asking whether there was a Third Way between the two extremes. We knew from contacts with Latin Americans as well as other Asians that it wasn't only in the Philippines that this question was being asked. In other parts of the world, the same question was being raised under conditions of the Cold War; and certainly among Church people in countries where Houtart's and similar ways of structural analysis had become popular.

### **The Third Way: Critical Collaboration**

We had an answer of sorts to the question which we never realized was THE answer until later. And it ran along these lines: It did not matter what one's particular ideology or program for change was—there are any number of ways of reform, each with its own special strengths (and weaknesses), none able to claim acceptance by all; but whatever ideology one believed was best, it had to be infused thoroughly by faith, modified by it, if modification was needed, motivated by its values, strengthened by them, developed under their guidance. In effect we were saying: Choose either extreme (there was no choice if one or the other prevailed in the nation?), but let your faith correct whatever was unacceptable in the ideology you choose

*(or suffer from if the choice is not yours to make?) and in the manner of its implementation. If this approach was ever thought of, it was because of the way religion was being blatantly instrumentalized by both political groups for THEIR ends. In this instrumentalizing, it wasn't faith that corrected and guided ideology but the other way around.*

*In time the approach became more and more the Center's-of many of the more involved ones, at least-in their rejecting of what were seen to be unacceptable in the reform blueprints of the two extremes and the embracing of the good that they stood for or tried to bring about. This approach was expressed in the term "critical collaboration". It was the stance taken by the AMRSP (Association of Major Religious Superiors of the Philippines) in the early years of Martial Law and later adopted and pushed by Cardinal Sin to whom authorship of the term has been wrongly attributed. In effect they were saying:*

*We collaborate with the good the New Society stands for and implements honestly by way of reform, always in a critical way; but by the same token, we don't accept what we see is wrong in the formulation and execution of its reforms, again, always in a critical way.*

*The emphasis was on critical, not so much on collaboration. The other side of the coin was "critical opposition" to what was wrong. As martial law progressed and with it the armed rebellion of the Left, the stance of critical collaboration/opposition had also to be applied to the latter. This stance was thus saying:*

*We are with the Left in its efforts to better the life condition of what its champions in the Church call the PDO-the poor, deprived and oppressed-of Philippine society. But also and always in a critical way. Hence we do not accept the*



way of violence that they keep insisting is the only way we can correct what is happening under the military regime of Marcos.

The “philosophy” of critical collaboration with all the forces for good within any ideological group, even though fraught with all kinds of problems, was the soul of simplicity and common sense: Maximize the good, minimize the bad. It was an approach, we realized, that could be used under any system of government one lived in, whether capitalistic, Communistic, tribal, monarchic-even ecclesiastic!

[“Critical collaboration/opposition”-this was to be done using the values of faith as our criteria for embracing one or the other ideology we were confronted with at the time, Marcos’s brand of capitalism or Marx’s version of socialism. One aspect of the ideological dilemma that bothered many of us, strangely enough, was the language being used by the Left about the part faith played as far as their ideological position was concerned. They spoke of a “faith dimension” in their program of social change added to the economic, political, and social dimensions. (The Right seemed unbothered by how they were to put their faith and their choice into one.) That kind of language said much about our difference with them. For to us it meant we first choose our political, economic, and social program of reform (i.e., a full-blown ideology) and then slap on our faith to it as just one more dimension. In practice this was to instrumentalize the faith, to use it to justify one’s prior choice of an ideology or system of change. Many of us in the Center would thus rather talk of a “perspective of faith”. It simply meant that whatever program of reform we make use of, every aspect of it must be examined under the light of faith, keeping what is in conformity with faith values, minimizing or rejecting what is not.

*The following anecdote, included in the book I alluded to above, is worth quoting for it illustrates well what we meant by "the perspective of faith". It also shows how the faith/ideology debate had reached the grassroots levels of Church in our BECs (basic ecclesial communities) and how our people were reflecting deeply and critically in their own way about what their faith meant even for their politics.]*

*I was giving a day of recollection to some leaders of our indigenous people and after the very first talk, one of them asked: "Why is it that the ideology that the Marxists are pushing is so attractive? What about us Christians? Don't we have an ideology too, and if we do, why doesn't it grab us the way the Marxist one does?" I didn't answer the question directly-I confess I had never thought of the question in the way he put it. Instead I suggested that it be made an additional point to ponder in the reflections and discussions the participants would be having as part of their day of recollection. They did just that, and at the end of the day, the same person who asked the question summarized the group's thinking this way:"We Christians have our faith to guide us in the decisions we take for our life. It is not an ideology in the sense of the Marxist one. The Marxist ideology is most attractive because it is very clear. Its followers have no qualms about the means they use. So long as the means they choose insure the attainment of their ends, they make use of them, no consideration given to whether they are morally good or bad. That is not true with us Christians. At every step we take, we have to pause and ask if what we decide to do is according to our faith's demands for moral action or not. This way things are not too clear. But that's what the life of faith is all about. Faith is a light that we have to make shine on our life to find out which way is God's way. And often we just have to walk through darkness."*

*I was flabbergasted-and humbled-by the summing up made by the man. And not just by the wisdom shown but much more by the depth of his and his companions' faith.*

*[That tribesman's summary of the results of the discerning process he and his group went through was, in my book, an act of authentic confessing, all the more so in that it was the result of prayerful discernment by a small community of professed believers to whom faith was not just a set of beliefs but an inner force and light for thought and action, for life itself.]*

*Francisco F. Claver, S.J.*

*San Jose Seminary*

*Loyola Heights*

*Quezon City*

*June 27, 2008*

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# **The 2008 Meeting of the American Society of Missiology, Part II.**

Colleagues,

*Preliminary Note: By the time next Thursday rolls around, Marie and I, God willing, won't be in St. Louis, but in Europe. For most of the rest of the summer—actually 41 days and 40 nights. Sounds almost Biblical. At either end of that stretch are two*

*conferences we're attending.*

*First one is four days for the 200th birthday of Wilhelm Loehe at his home-town of Neuendettelsau in Bavaria, Germany. If this Lutheran superstar is unknown to you, Google his name, but don't believe Wikipedia when it designates him "a founding sponsor of the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod." He IS the godfather of much of German Lutheranism in the USA, but of the "other" German Lutherans, not the LCMS crowd.*

*At the end of the itinerary is the week-long conference of the International Association for Mission Studies in Hungary. My contribution, slotted for presentation there, was posted to you two weeks ago. Three of you responded with good suggestions. I included every one received. [I'll ask our webmaster, Tom Law, to update the first draft already on the ThTh Crossings website, so these goodies go into the permanent record.]*

*For the days inbetween those conference brackets, we're taking a railpass—gas is \$10 a gallon, so no car rental and the murderous traffic on the Autobahn. A dozen or so folks from our ancient days in Germany on Marie's Fulbright scholarship to Hamburg (1955ff.) have invited us to pay a visit. So we intend to. From fotos they've sent us, some of them have really grown old!*

*Robin Morgan will manage ThTh postings through the end of August. I've put a couple items in the pipeline, she'll fill in the blanks.*

*Now to the real text for this week.*

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*Last week's Part I report of the June ASM meeting centered on the "fork in the road" for mission theology presented by Luther's theology and Karl Barth's theology—at the very points where Barth himself said "It's an either/or." That either/or*

surfaced at ASM 2008 at two fundamental places—how you talk about God and how you read the Bible.

God-talk (which is what “theo-logy” literally means) starts either with God’s own self—that “aseity” term—or with God-and-humans already entangled with one another. Barth said the former, Luther the latter. Luther said that the aseity adventure was a no-no. It seeks to probe the hidden mysteries of God instead of starting with God revealed, finally God-revealed in Jesus, the crucified and risen Messiah. It is an either/or.

And on reading the Bible, it’s either “That God speaks to us at all is already grace” (Barth) or “That God speaks to us is true, but the messages are not all grace” (Luther). Example: “Adam, what have you done?” was indeed divine address, but it was not good news. When speaking those words God the critic, the just critic, was indeed “messaging” (as “they” now say) our primal parent. Grace it was not. No smiley face from either partner in that conversation.

God hasn’t stopped sending messages of critique. They are not good news. They expose sinners, and finally eliminate them. Unless . . . unless there is a “sweet swap” intervention from God’s other word, God’s “regime-change” with sinners, promised from Abrahamic days and filled-full finally in God-revealed in Jesus, the crucified and risen Messiah. Those two messages are an either/or. At the end of the line sinners are either dead or alive. There is no Biblcial basis for saying “That God speaks to us at all is already grace.”

All the major presenttions at ASM 2008 took Barth’s fork in the road.

Suppose the presenters had taken the other fork in the road and appropriated for themselves those two “mistakes” (ala Barth) that Luther made.

Here are some hunches linked to the same 5 lecture topics.

## **Lecture #1: "Fixing" the Defect(s) in the Systematic Theology of Missio Dei**

How Luther's theology can help.

A. Major theological defect of Missio Dei theology [hereafter MD] is not its fuzzy trinitarianism, as our keynote speaker told us, namely, that MD ignores God's "aseity," God's "underived or independent existence.". A more basic defect underlying MD's acclaimed trinitarianism, is its blindness to the Biblical given that God has two "missions" operating in the world, not just one. MD#1 is to preserve the now-fallen world (sin-infested with evil on the loose) from total self-destruction. MD#2 is to redeem that world, in the literal meaning of redeem: God regaining ownership of the renegade humans who are central to the mess, and through them, once they are "re-owned," rescuing "old" creation into a new creation. That these two missions are very different is perfectly clear. God does not die in carrying out MD1. It did take such a death to carry out MD2. Yes, same God, two distinct MDs. Two different agendas, agencies, instruments needed, for the two MDs. In Luther's Biblical metaphors: God's left hand and God's right hand, God's law and God's promise.

B. Important Biblical texts for Luther here:

- The Moses/Jesus juxtaposition throughout John's Gospel, beginning already in the prologue.
- Sermon on the Mount in Matthew.
- 2 Cor. 3-5 with God's TWO "covenants," two "ministries/serving projects" the central theme.
- Galatians 4.
- Letter to the Hebrews with its two priesthoods, two covenants, better and "worse" promises.

C. A distinctive trinitarianism (a promissory Trinity) arises from this different way of reading the Bible, different from the one that has come along with MD and different from the Barth model that our keynoter recommended for improving MD's defects. Gary Simpson (missiologist at Luther Seminary, St. Paul) argues that you don't even "need" a Trinitarian deity in your theology, if Barth's axiom is true: "that God speaks to us at all is already grace." Monism, just one undifferentiated deity, will do.

In Luther's Large Catechism it goes like this. The issue is not how to talk about God correctly, but how to be able to speak of God as "Father," for that term is grace-filled God-talk. Although we recite the trinitarian vocables in the sequence of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, the sequence is actually reversed in Christian lived experience. "We could never come to recognize the Father's favor and grace were it not for the Lord Christ, who is a mirror of the Father's heart. Apart from him we see nothing but an angry and terrifying judge. But neither could we know anything of Christ, had it not been revealed by the Holy Spirit." Connecting with God-Holy Spirit comes first, then God-Son, then God-Father. That is Trinitarian theology that comes out as Good News.

Where's the good news in God's aseity? So don't take the aseity fork in the road. Instead take the fork marked "God-and-us entangled." Don't take the "every word/act of God is grace" fork, but the "Christic-grace trumps God-the-critic" fork.

The doctrine of the Trinity is a proposal for talking about God and having it come out as Gospel. Mission theology and praxis arising from such a trinitarian theology is what's needed to reconstruct MD for the 21st century. More below.

**Lecture #2: Studying the Bible with Mission in Mind.**

The second presenter spent lots of time with 2 Corinthians 5. A classic text, no doubt. For Luther it was “super” classic. He found one of his major preachable metaphors there in Paul’s propaganda (good sense) using the verb/noun reconcile/reconciliation. But he heard that fundamental Pauline term (the Greek word for it is found ONLY in Paul’s letters, nowhere else, in the NT!) saying something different from what this presenter (and Barth too?) heard. Doubtless hermeneutics is in the mix, but also the initial common everyday meaning of the Greek term (kataallassein/katallagee) in the language-culture of the Hellenistic world. Its root meaning is “exchange,” taken straight from the marketplace for buying and selling, “exchanging” goods and services, either in barter or for cash. Paul doubtless used it every day that he was out in front of his shop doing propaganda (good sense) for his tents. It’s not a religious term. It comes from the streets. Nor is it initially a human-relations term. Its first use in Hellenistic Greek does not designate what “reconcile” generally means in today’s English: hostility being changed into friendship.

When Paul talks about God’s reconciling the world unto himself (term comes five times in the 2 Cor 5 text), Luther put this into German as “Froehlicher Wechsel,” a joyful exchange. A very “sweet swap.”

At the end of the sweet swap friendship does indeed replace hostility, but it takes the swapping to bring about the friendship. One is cause, one consequence. So what’s all involved in the exchange, the reconciliation, the transaction that results in friendship restored?

The God-in-Christ reconciliation event is a monumental, even bizarre, exchange, namely, the sin of sinners is transferred to a sinless Christ and Christ’s righteousness is transferred to very UNrighteous sinners. And God not only approves the



transaction, but initiates it. This reconciliation is just like a marketplace exchange where what was once the possession of one partner (e.g., Paul's handmade leather tent) becomes the possession of his customer, and the possession of the other partner (e.g., Paul's customer's cash) becomes the possession of the other (goes into Paul's moneybag).

This 2 Corinthians text was key for Luther's calling reconciliation a "froehlicher Wechsel." And that text was not alone. It had a powerful parallel in Galatians 3:13f. Look at this exchange—curses exchanged for blessings! "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us . . . in order that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith." Look at that sweet swap. Christ takes ownership of the sinner's curse and the sinner takes ownership of the Abrahamic blessing. All of it transpiring "in Christ Jesus . . . so that we might receive the (Abrahamic) promise(!) of the Spirit, by faith alone."

So for Luther the "ministry of reconciliation" now entrusted to those already-reconciled is THE mission assignment. And what it is, is simple: keep the sweet swap going. Its first word is not "you people who are fighting, stop fighting and be friends with each other." No, it's simply "Be reconciled to God." Get in on God's own sweet swap with you. Exchange with Jesus—your load for his largesse. If you don't "un-load," you don't yet have it. Exchanges are bilateral, or they don't happen at all. Both partners divest, both receive. Human-to-human reconciliation can be achieved by people not yet reconciled to God. God has MD#1 resources going for that. But with humans not yet reconciled to God, MD#1 human-to-human reconciliation is still "old" creation. It's still part of that "heaven and earth that WILL pass away," as Jesus says. Without Christ's sweet swap no sinner's God-problem is solved.

### Lecture #3: Church History and Missio Dei

Presenter number three focused on one major metaphor in Luther's blueprint with his recurring propaganda (good sense) for reading church history with lenses looking for "cruciformity" in the life of the church, past and present. His Gospel as "theology of the cross" took Luther's fork in the road. The way he paired that with his other key term "apostolicity" may have given the impression that these two terms were of equal character. Crassly put: Do church history this way: check out the cruciformity and the apostolicity of every segment in the church's past. Wherever in the world people past or present confess Christ, check out the cruciformity ("is their Gospel centered at the cross-place?") and the apostolicity ("are they hustling that center out to the peripheries in their own worlds?").

Both good. But the former is primal, the latter (the propaganda—in the good sense) is second in line. If some "other" gospel is at that center, that too may well have its apostolicity. Case in point: today's Islam. The connection between the two that I'd pursue if I could do it all over again (and I was prof for systematic AND historical theology once upon a time) would be to listen again to the history of Christians, especially those outside my heritage, to learn what the connection was between the cruciformity or lack thereof in the gospel they trusted and the "urge to propaganda" that that very gospel did/did not ignite. My hunch is that the withering of the propaganda-push (apostolicity) in the history of the Body of Christ is directly linked to the quality of the cruciformity of the gospel at the center of the set. Christian communities that are "mission-minus" need a better Gospel at the center. If a Gospel-minus is at the center, all the hype to make them "more missional" is itself bad news and will propagandize more bad news.

In one of Luther's favored mission metaphors, God drops his Christ-Cross-Gospel into our world as a pebble in a pool. The ripple effect is automatic. You need no instruction to generate the outward flow of the energy –e.g., mission. If there is little or no ripple effect, the problem is with the pebble at the center. It must have been the wrong rock, different from the Christ-pebble that God dropped into our puddle at the outset. Church historians need to sleuth out the ripple effects of the variety of gospels that have rippled through church history, checking how they reflect the original Christ-pebble at the center that started it all. That would be humongous help for those of us (mostly Western Christians, I suspect) who bemoan the demise of "apostolicity" in our day, the demise of "missional" consciousness in Christians.

[Better said, the demise of missional consciousness in "Western" Christians. Ripples, BIG ripples, are reported in many other places in the Christian pond these days. One example: The Mekane Yesus Lutheran Church in Ethiopia has now the second largest membership of all Lutheran churches in the world. And from what I know, they have never heard of MD—of its one-time supposed promise, nor of its failure. Somehow the Gospel they hear and into which they are baptized makes them think "If you are baptized, you are a missionary." Sounds like "and has committed to us (the 'merely' baptized) the ministry of reconciliation."]

Back here in Western Christianity, we say (or think) "Pebble, yes, we are dropping the pebble, but no ripples." Luther might counsel us thus: Check the pebble you're dropping. It might be a diminished gospel, or even (horrors! ) an "other" one. Matter of fact, a diminished gospel IS an "other" gospel.

[Excursus. An "other" Gospel, Paul's term for what confronts his Galatian congregation as he writes to them, is indeed a "diminished" Gospel. But note the nature of the diminishment in

Paul's analysis. Not that something has been taken away from the pebble in Galatia. They still promote and believe a crucified and risen Jesus. But they've ADDED stuff to the pebble. Requirements, requirements, requirements. "Gospel-plus" is now the pebble being plopped in pool at Galatia. So "other" is this Gospel-plus pebble that the end result is: "Christ died in vain." Hence the oxymoronic axiom: "The original Gospel is diminished by add-ons." Add on anything to the "cruciform Gospel" and it's already less than the original. It's an "other" gospel, on the slippery slide to the verdict: "if justification comes with any add-ons (you've gotta do this, you've gotta have that – in addition to "having" Christ), then Christ died in vain"]].

#### **Lectures #4 and #5: "Missio Dei and Practical Theology," and "Missio Dei and Theological Formation"**

Someone else can do these two topics following Luther's fork in the road. There's a rumor out that we might get one like that at ASM 2009. If so, d.v., we can report it next year.

Classic for both practical theology and theological education is Bob Bertram's essay (from 1971!) "Doing Theology in Relation to Mission." <https://crossings.org/archive/bob/DoingTheologyinMission.pdf>

A trio of rhyming Latin terms is the nucleus—promissio, confessio, missio. Arch-Lutheran axiom is that the cruciform Gospel is a promise. Trusting that promise is the bottom-line confession of sinners reconciled to God. God's Christic promise is THE pebble that reconciles. Mission ripples out from that center – by definition.

When THIS pebble drops, ripples happen. No ripples? Must have been a different pebble, not THIS one. In Lutheran lingo, God-in-Christ drops the MD#2 pebble into God's MD#1 world where the

whole human race lives. It's the offer of a sweet swap, a regime change. Mission is propaganda (good sense) on the part of those already enjoying the sweet swap, already "lifted" when the pebble's ripple-effect got to them. If that hasn't yet happened to you or your ecclesial community, then God needs to send a missionary to plop THE pebble into your puddle again.

Unless God retires me beforehand from ASM membership, I'll keep paying my dues until something like this shows up on the conference program: Luther's proposal that God's TWO missions, MD#1 and MD#2, are the ecumenical blueprint for mission coming from the Pebble Himself. [It's not just Luther's Wittenberg whimsy.] Let the presenter show us how to tell them apart—why that is important for the whole ball of wax—and then how to hold them together. And then tell us what sort of missiology flows down Luther's fork on the ecumenical road.

"Promissio is the secret of missio." That's Bertram's last sentence in the essay mentioned above. It is Luther's mission mantra.

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## **The 2008 Meeting of the American Society of Missiology**

Colleagues,

Two weekends ago, June 19-22, (for what might be the 30th time) I was with the mission studies crowd at the annual meeting of the American Society of Missiology. Many of them are dear (and now, like me, "old") friends, and each year a bunch of youngsters shows up to add to the collegiality and the

friendship. Dear for me this year was also connecting with half a dozen grad students (possibly only two of them Lutherans) from Luther Seminary in St. Paul, MN. From what I heard from them I think they've got it.

ThTh posts in the past [if interested, check them out on the Crossings website, usually in July of the year] have brought reports of these gatherings, often telling of my one-string-banjo with its alleged Lutheran notes chiming into the ecumenical symphony that characterizes ASM annual meetings. As usual I encored it again. [A "vox clamantis in deserto"? Not really. See ThTh 523 on the website as evidence.]

Though ASM membership is across the entire ecumenical spectrum (a vast array), a consensus-theology often gets wide approval—from Roman Catholics all the way over to the Mennonites. I've told you about it in those past reports. It comes under the rubric of "Missio Dei" (Latin for "God's Mission"). Mission work is God's own work, not the church's work. But the notion of what God's mission is, what God's up to in the world, is perceived according to the axiom made famous by Karl Barth: "That God speaks to us at all is already grace."

My constant counterpoint to that ASM cantus firmus of God's ONE mission (encompassing all of God's word and work in the world, and all of it grace-full) has been—you guessed it—God's DUPLEX mission. One of them is grace, yes, the other is something else. Sometimes I even recite Luther's own words: "When I discovered that God's law is one thing and God's Gospel is something else, that was my breakthrough."

Well, you had to be there at this year's get-together in order to believe what I'm going to tell you now.

Three things, maybe four, were jolting.

1. In inviting us to this year's assembly our president simply announced "The theology of Missio Dei has failed." That was jolting to me, since I hadn't heard. Up until this 2008 meeting it was the shibboleth at every ASM annual meeting. But others—"real" missiologists active in the discipline—apparently knew that this was true. Yes, I'd been doing my banjo tune for years that MD had failed to address God's duplex mission in the world, but that wasn't the failure that all apparently acknowledged. And no one ever told us point-blank what the failure was. So in view of MD's agreed-upon failure we were gathering this year to see if we could put humpty-dumpty back together again—basically retaining that logo after serious repairs to render MD "apostolic." That is the key concept apparently lacking in earlier "theology of MD," and by its absence contributing to the failure. "Apostolic" is to be understood in its literal Greek meaning of "being sent." So we met under the theme "Envisioning Apostolic Theology: As the Father Sends . . . ."

The invitation said: "At the ASM meeting we shall consider an apostolic theology that, by recovering a robust trinitarian account of the life of God, re-envisions the missionary act as the form that human fellowship with God takes here and now." Goal: "The conference will propose a vision of the mission of God [yes, the term is redeemable] for theological education and mission practice."

2. Second jolt was that four of the five major speakers all came with Princeton Theological Seminary credentials—two are current profs there, the other two have Princeton Ph.D's. I complained to the prez when the announcement came out that it seemed a tad lop-sided for our consciously ecumenical society, but nothing happened. It was a done deal. Four of the speakers addressed the two

key words in the theme, “trinitarian and apostolic,” in terms of the four classic seminary disciplines of their daily work: systematic theology, Biblical exegesis, church history, practical theology. In the fifth address the president (one of the Princeton profs) gave us his “vision of the mission of God for theological education and mission practice.” It was a neatly crafted program, but in its own way a patently one-string banjo.

3. Then came this jolt. Every one of the four called on Karl Barth—some with dozens of footnotes—as their theologian for repairing *Missio Dei*. The program was not only “all Princeton,” but also “all Karl Barth” as doctor to heal MD’s malady. After the fourth Princetonian sang Barth’s praises, I realized that I should not have been surprised. Barth is still the guru for today’s Reformed theological tradition—also among those who are that tradition’s brightest and best.
4. Fourth jolt came from the fifth speaker, a European Roman Catholic theologian with three doctoral degrees (Sorbonne, Rome, Munich). Nothing in that sentence was the jolt. Genuine shock—not just for me— was that on the very first slide of her powerpoint presentation, who should be smiling down on us from the screen but Karl Barth! I kid you not. For whatever reason, she started with Barth as her guru too. As she subsequently showed us, Barth connected well with the Vatican II theology that was the infrastructure of her remedial work on MD in the field of practical theology.

You just had to be there.

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Some reflections:

1. Someone quoted the grand guru of missiology David Bosch



and his caveating missiologists not to slide into “propaganda” in doing their work. Bosch was not cited in reference to the Princeton-and-Barth take over for the weekend, though that was my immediate thought. But then another thought occurred

2. Propaganda is not a dirty word. It’s a good word in the ancient Latin language of both Roman and Lutheran theology. Remember its actual meaning: “propago,” to spread, expand, extend, enlarge, prolong something—a cause, a project, an idea, a “gospel.”
3. It’s a good missional term. Christ’s disciples are under assignment to be propagandists for HIS distinct Gospel.
4. In that good sense of the word we had a weekend of Princeton propaganda.
5. Barth was also the blueprint for the presenters’ theological propaganda (good sense of the term) even when not cited by footnote. [How do I know? I was Barth’s student in Basel in the early 50s. I also was a student in those days of Barth’s Lutheran critics in Erlangen and Hamburg, and did my dissertation on Barth (and Troeltsch) and Luther.] Barth’s concept of grace was sympatico even with the classical Roman Catholic tradition.
6. Luther’s “case for grace” in the 16th century—drawn, he also claimed, straight from the Bible—was clean contrary to what grace had come to mean during the preceding centuries of scholastic theology. Barth’s Lutheran contemporaries critiqued him on the same grounds during his lifetime. When Luther and Barth speak of grace, they are not talking about the same thing.
7. In my old age I’ve come to see that over and over again in theological discussion the issue is hermeneutics: How do you read the Bible? All Christian theologies claim to be Biblically grounded. And despite great variation they are. Yet not all read the Bible through the same lenses.

“Biblical hermeneutics is at no point separable from Biblical soteriology” is Bob Bertram’s classic axiom. It’s simply true, true, true. How you read the Bible is always linked to what you think salvation is all about—and vice versa. ASM 2008 was a weekend exercise in Barth’s hermeneutics (and soteriology). Barth’s hermeneutics (and soteriology) shaped the original 1952 Willingen notion of *Missio Dei*, and the half-century of “theology of MD” now deemed to have failed. So it was ironic that Barth’s lenses were commended to us by every one of the five presenters for “fixing” MD’s defects. Can Barth’s theology be both the cause of MD’s failure and at the same time the remedy for that failure? Remarkable.

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Excursus. After strumming an occasional note on my banjo in the discussions, more than one friend asked me: “Ed, is everything wrong that Barth says?” Not my point, I tried to say. Barth and Luther start at two different places to do theology. Barth knew this and said so—over and over again. He said the options at crucial points between him and Luther were either/or. Luther made two big mistakes, Barth claimed. Number 1: “Luther emphatically shifted the interest from what God is in himself to what God is for man.” Thus Luther opened the door for man-centered theology in the 19th century, notoriously in Schleiermacher, Barth’s arch-enemy. Barth’s shelf-long *Church Dogmatics* seeks to correct Luther’s mistake. “What God is in himself” is the subject-matter for theology again. Number 2: Luther’s “discovery” of the law-gospel distinction as lenses for reading the Bible was wrong. The sequence was wrong (should be gospel and then law), and as a hermeneutic it leads us away from, not into, the Bible message of grace.

Neither of these two items is a “doctrine.” They’re presuppositions, starting points, forks in the road that leave

their mark on everything that follows. Luther claimed that these two “mistakes” were the very “Aha!” at the center of his move from being a Roman Catholic to being an Evangelical Catholic. If they are mistakes, then everything that follows in his theology is flawed too.

Was this either/or on the scene at Techny? In one place right in our face. The keynote lecture was 15 pages on God’s “being and act” (and the consequences for MD). It articulated in crisp detail God’s “aseity” (technical term for “underived or independent existence”). Aseity is “what God is in himself.” Barth is right, Luther wrong.

Luther’s Aha! turned him away from God’s “aseity” as theology’s starting point. Starting with God’s aseity had been what he’d learned in his own scholastic theological formation. It amounted, he later learned, to playing around with the “hidden God.” Not only a mistake, but dangerous, even lethal. He labelled it a “theology of glory,” from which you could never get to the Biblical “theology of the cross.” It was a fork in the road. You start either with the hidden-God’s aseity in your theology or with the revealed-God’s cross. It’s a fork in the road.

But our 10 hours of program time at Techny were overstuffed. Five major presentations and a business meeting tucked in left no space at all for any conversation like this. No wonder my couple of quips sounded like a curmudgeon grouching that everything Barthian is wrong. Not the issue. I’ll grant the curmudgeon part, but not the grouching. It’s about fundamental theology. Where are the foundations for Barth’s propaganda (good sense) and for Luther’s? Why are the differences significant for MD?

I scribbled a note the next morning to the keynote speaker (with

a new Princeton Ph.D.) after his opener, “Missio Dei: A Trinitarian Envisioning of a Non-Trinitarian Theme.” His was a massive Barth-grounded Trinitarianism to repair the defective doctrine of the Trinity in MD. Probing God’s being and God’s act were at the center, from which he drew the beneficial consequences of such a better Trinitarianism to hold the church’s own being and act together when it comes to mission. He’d said in the discussion following his presentation that he had read my own “Deconstructing Missio Dei” essay of four years ago. So in my scribbles I listed some items we might talk about, captioning it “An Op Ed.” Though we did have one good conversation at one coffee break, we never found time to pick up any of the items I’d scribbled.

D.v., that will be the starting point for ThTh #526 next time. The angle? Delving into God's being and act sounds too much like probing the "hidden God" in theologies of glory. Luther designated both of them a no-no. And for this reason: "God revealed" in the theology of the cross is all we've got for Christian God-talk. As the Lutheran confessions say "satis est," it is enough. Searching for more than that is dangerous. Even worse than that, it's deadly.

Peace and Joy!  
Ed Schroeder

# Luther's Missiology. A

# Conference Paper

*Colleagues: Here's the current shape of the text for a presentation I'm to make in August at IAMS XII. That's the 12th every-four-years conference of the International Association for Mission Studies, this year meeting in Budapest. Marie and I have been to the last eight, beginning with Bangalore in 1982. Every now and then I speak up, sometimes on invitation. This year I got an invitation. Take a look at it and let me know if you have thoughts to make it better.*

*Peace & Joy,  
Ed Schroeder*

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**Conference Theme: “The Gospel of Reconciliation and Human Identity: Mission Theology for the 21st Century.”**

**Proposed paper by Edward H. Schroeder  
St. Louis, Missouri, USA**

**Title: Luther's Theology of Reconciliation and Identity: Mission Theology for the 21st Century.**

## **Part I**

*Luther a Mission Theologian? Yes, Indeed. “Reconciliation” at the Center of his Mission Theology*

*Ever since Gustav Warneck declared that Luther had no mission theology (1892), Luther has had a bad rap among missiologists. Too bad. Big mistake. Simply stated: Luther saw 16th century Europe—though perhaps already 99% “churched” (as we say today) — as a mission field, HIS mission field, by the “accident” of*

*God having placed him in the middle of it.*

*Now that 21st-century Europe—as once-upon-a-time “churched,” but now no longer— is patently a mission field, Luther is a resource not to be spurned in today’s mission to the formerly-Christian western world.*

*For Luther it was not widespread atheism nor the presence of European Muslims that identified Europe, or any land, as a field for Christian mission. With his reformation “Aha!” came the realization that a mission field is any place where people are trusting “other” gospels, that is, gospels clearly different from the Christ-gospel proclaimed in the New Testament scriptures. Today no one disputes that Islam, for instance, regardless of any further evaluation, is indeed an “other” gospel.*

*Luther came to see that alternate gospels were in circulation inside (not outside) the Christian church of his day. Is it any different today? He knew them well, for they had shaped his own piety and theology into the third decade of his life. But these alternate “Christian” gospels, as he came to see, were neither as “good” nor as “new” as the Christ-gospel at the center of the Christian scriptures. So for the “Reformer-years” of Luther’s life he understood himself as a missionary, a missionary “inside” the Christian church, inside the “Holy” Roman Empire. St. Paul’s term about an “other gospel” regnant in his Galatian Christian congregation became Luther’s term for the same phenomenon in his Latin Christian homeland.*

*Yes, in his day, apart from Jews in Europe, all were baptized, and most all doubtless would have confessed faith in God. Christ too would not be absent from the confession. But Luther addressed that faith-in-God, even faith-in-Christ, among his fellow baptized by pushing (first of all within himself) to*

hear what gospel they actually trusted when making their God-and-Christ confession.

Such a probe was already a move away from understanding the Christian faith as what you believed in your head or the rituals you practiced. It focused on what you trusted in the heart – from the cerebral to the visceral. Better said, to the “cardiac,” the Scriptural metaphor of the human heart. “Fear, love, trust” became Luther’s verbs of the heart for what believing meant. Yes, even “fear” since fear was negative trust. His folksy metaphor for faith in God was “what you hang your heart on.” And we all know from our own hearts that fear, too, is a heart-hanger.

And those three verbs applied to all “faiths,” also those beyond the Christian realm. His Biblical studies and his own experience convinced Luther that every human heart “hangs” on some experienced (or imagined) resource/power “to which we look for all good and in which we find refuge in every time of need.” Explicitly moving away from thoughts of God in our heads, he says: “That to which your heart clings and entrusts itself is, I say, your real God.”

The “Aha!” about the Christ-gospel and hearts hanging on it was “*evangelium est promissio*.” The Christ-gospel is a promise, not a doctrine, a promise from God. All promises—Christ’s too—don’t “work” just because they are held to be true and given assent. No, all promises, both human and divine, call for trust. They only “work” to benefit the promisee when trusted. Promises untrusted are wasted promises. Only when trusted (= *sola fide*, by faith alone) do promises come true when offered. [That’s what the Lutheran *sola fide* mantra is all about.]

When placed alongside this Christ-promise, the alternate gospels within the church of their day, so Luther and his

fellow reformers, were “semi-Pelagian.” That was a reference back to ancient Christian “heretic” Pelagius, who contended that genuinely serious people could work out their own salvation with no need of God’s grace at all. He granted that such self-savers were rare, but it was not impossible.

The semi-Pelagian variation was “semi” of that, a half-and-half gospel where “if / when you do your half, God’s grace will do the other half” for your salvation. The medieval mantra for this was “*facere quod in se est*” [you do what you are able to do] and then the grace of God, rewarding you for that effort, does the rest. Despite its manifold variations, that half-Pelagian axiom was an “other” gospel for the reformers. So their homeland was a mission field. The mission agenda: to supplant that gospel with Christ’s own “better” gospel, to move the already baptized who trusted the semi-Pelagian gospel to becoming the baptized who trusted the Christ-gospel “alone.”

The occasionally “extreme” rhetoric about this among the Lutheran reformers arose predominantly from pastoral experience. Semi-Pelagian gospels were not merely being promoted in much of church life, which was bad enough. But *horribile dictu*, in the parishes, in the confessional stalls, Pelagius’ promise (full or half) was being trusted far and wide among the parishioners. Ask a peasant what he was trusting when he purchased one of Tetzels’ indulgences, and he’d tell you.

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The “missional theology” arising from this reformation heritage and practiced in the 16th century offers resources not to be spurned for mission in the 21st century. That is especially the case for the key terms of this year’s IAMS conference: Reconciliation and Human Identity. But before we get there, I want to summarize these reformation theologoumena, the foundation for Luther’s mission theology.



1. It is not theism, belief in God, that is the goal of Christian mission, but faith in the Christ gospel, humans “hanging their hearts” on God’s promise in the crucified and risen Christ.
2. Everybody trusts some gospel in that everyone “hangs their heart” somewhere, and for many of us, we hang it in many different places, as we soon see when we review what it is, what ALL it is, that we fear, love, or trust – even in just one day! Atheists and nihilists and secularists are in their own way heart-hangers too.
3. The Christ gospel is a promise, not a “teaching.” That, too, was a segment of the reformation “Aha!” for, because it is a promise, you don’t accept and “believe” it in your head but you trust it, you hang your heart on it.
4. “Other” gospels are also promissory. The radical claim of the “Good News” promise is that it is both “good” and “new” in comparison with any other promise.
5. Going along with the promissory Gospel is the reformers’ constant use of the verb “offer.” The gospel is offered as a promise. It becomes effective, it achieves the goal intended by the promisor, when the offer is trusted. The reformation mantra “sola fide,” by faith alone, is in a sense a no-brainer. Faith is trust, and promises only “work” when they are trusted. What gives faith its clout is not the strength of the person doing the trusting, but the power in the promise being trusted.
6. So what is that power in the promise being trusted? Luther’s understanding of reconciliation is a good place to start.
7. [The missional element –the sending/moving out–of the Christ-promise, was seen by Luther as a “Platzregen,” a moving thunder-shower. In the Christ-promise Platzregen, God-in-Christ is the Holy Gust that moves the rain cloud “ubi et quando visum est deo” – where and when God wills.

*Yes, humans are agents in God's Platzregen operation, but clearly secondary agents, mostly to divine where the Platzregen—on its own—is moving and then get themselves wet in the enterprise. But the Platzregen metaphor goes beyond this paper.]*

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## **Part II**

### ***Luther a Mission Theologian starting with “Reconciliation” – for a Mission Theology for the 21st Century.***

*Were Luther to have encountered our modern mantra of Missio Dei, he'd probably have said “Good term, but only when you remember that Promissio Dei is the secret of Missio Dei. And if you're holding a conference on Reconciliation and Human Identity, pay attention to this: Promissio is at the center of reconciliation. Promissio is what's good and new in the Good News of reconciliation. Promissio generates what is “new” in human identities, namely, new faith, new hope, new love, new obedience, finally, a whole new creation.*

*We can start with the key verb “offer” mentioned above. The Christ-promise is an offer. One major NT metaphor for that offer is reconciliation.*

*Luther's favored German term for “God reconciling the world unto himself in Christ” is “froehlicher Wechsel,” literally a “joyful exchange,” rendered into American English by my own teacher, the late Robert Bertram, as a “sweet swap.”*

*Early on (in Christian Freedom, 1520) Luther described it this way: “Faith unites the believing soul with Christ . . . so that what belongs to Christ now belongs to the believing soul, and what belongs to the soul now belongs to Christ. Since Christ possesses every good and blessedness, these now belong to the*

soul. Since the soul is burdened with sin and wretchedness, these now become Christ's. Here now begins the joyful exchange [froehlicher Wechsel], and the struggle. When Christ . . . through the wedding-ring of faith, takes upon Himself the sins of the believing soul as though He had committed them, they must be swallowed up and drowned in Him. For his invincible righteousness is stronger than all sin. Thus the soul is cleansed from all sin, that is, because of her faith she is free and unhampered and endowed with the eternal righteousness of Christ, her bridegroom."

"Wechsel" is a word coming straight from the marketplace—the exchange of goods and services, buying and selling. In today's English that understanding of reconciliation is no longer common, though it does exist at the periphery as a commercial term. E.g., reconciling your bank statement with your checkbook, and reconciling accounts.

Today's use of reconciliation signals peace restored in the world of human conflict—"the exchange of hostility for a friendly relationship." [So even BDAG, 521 for the NT use of the term] But that does not capture enough of what Paul wants us to hear when he claims in the primal reconciliation text of the NT: "God was in Christ reconciling the world." As Paul interprets the God-in-Christ reconciliation he uses the marketplace meaning of the word. Yes, friendship does finally replace hostility, but that is not his point.

This God-in-Christ event is a more monumental, even more bizarre, exchange, namely, the sin of sinners being transferred to a sinless Christ and Christ's righteousness being transferred to very UNrighteous sinners. And God not only approving the transaction, but initiating it. This reconciliation is just like a marketplace exchange where what was once the possession of one partner (e.g., Paul's handmade

leather tent) becomes the possession of his customer, and the possession of the other exchange partner (e.g., Paul's customer's cash) becomes the possession of the other (goes into Paul's moneybag).

This 2 Corinthians text was key for Luther's understanding of reconciliation as "froehlicher Wechsel." And that text was not alone. It had a powerful Pauline parallel in Galatians 3:13f. Look at this exchange—curses exchanged for blessings! "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us . . . in order that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith." Look at that sweet swap. Christ takes ownership of the sinner's curse and the sinner takes ownership of the Abrahamic blessing. All of it transpiring "in Christ Jesus . . . so that we might receive the [Abrahamic] promise[!] of the Spirit, by faith [alone]."

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### **Part III**

#### **Reconciliation in Missiology Today An Auseinandersetzung with Robert Schreiter**

Although "reconciliation" is a major missional item these days, as our IAMS 12 conference demonstrates, the marketplace meaning of the term hasn't gotten much attention. From my place at the edges of the discipline I've seen none at all. Reconciliation as friendship replacing hostility is what "everybody" knows is the meaning of the term. Prominent example of this is the work of Robert Schreiter from the Catholic Theological Union in Chicago with his several books from ORBIS BOOKS on the subject. At least half a dozen of his books are on ORBIS's current list. Reconciliation is a central theme to many of them.

Two of his titles are: "Reconciliation. Mission and Ministry in a Changing Social Order" (Orbis, 1992) and "The Ministry of Reconciliation. Spiritualities and Strategies" (Orbis, 1998). The margins of my copies—no surprise— are now filled with Lutheran op eds and second opinions.

Two themes recur in these marginalia. #1 No awareness of the marketplace meaning of the key term and thus no attention to exchange (the sweet swap) for grounding a theology of reconciliation, and #2 the very INsignificant role that reconciliation coram deo [hereafter RCD] plays throughout Schreiter's work. That is true even when RCD is understood as Schreiter does (friendship replacing hostility between God and sinners). The gist of my complaint is that Schreiter's major focus, constant drumbeat, for Christian mission is reconciliation coram hominibus [RCH], human-to-human reconciliation— getting folks in conflict to stop fighting and be "human" to one another.

In Schreiter's oft-repeated definition, God's reconciliation project is God, Christ, and now Christ's people "staying in solidarity and hope with those who suffer . . . who struggle for a better world." The Christian gospel of reconciliation is God's own "peace and justice" agenda for the world.

Though never explicitly denied, the reality of a planet-wide humanity still UN-reconciled to God never surfaces for serious attention. It appears that since Christ's cross and resurrection all humanity IS now reconciled to God, any hostility between sinners and God is passe, finished, a done deal—even if multitudes around the globe (also inside the churches!) don't trust it.

The conclusion is: so now let's get busy with intra-human reconciliation, with undoing the daily news headlines of

worldwide mayhem and madness. That's the only part of God's reconciliation project not yet complete. RS says point-blank that the "ministry of reconciliation" given to Christians is to carry out, carry through the human-to-human reconciliation project. He has the chutzpah to quote Paul's use of the phrase in 2Cor5 for this RCH, even though the apostle himself says expressly that the "ministry of reconciliation" means just one thing—"beseeching you —yes, you Corinthians Christians—be reconciled to God." For Paul it is RCD that is his mission agenda. From my reading of his epistles, I conclude that reconciliation with God is the only agenda Paul sees in what he calls the "ministry of reconciliation" entrusted to him.

Schreiter's reconciliation theology and praxis is on the one hand fascinating, on the other frustrating. Fascinating because of his insight into the dynamics of human conflicts, how reconciliation can work (and sometimes does happen), and fascinating most of all in how he grounds that all in the Bible.

But there is where my "Aargh!" arises alongside my awe for his theological work. And in my old age it finally comes as no surprise. Schreiter is working with classic Roman Catholic DNA in his bones. His is the classic RC blueprint of "grace perfecting nature." My theological genes are coded with the Lutheran Aha! of "God's promise trumping God's law."

You get two different reconciliation-theologies from those two different double helixes.

Here are some theses:

RS: Reconciliation coram deo is a done deal—the world (all of it) IS already reconciled to God. Granted, many do not know that it is already a done deal, nor act accordingly. So that is a task still to be done: Inform them, tell them, let them

know: "It's all finished—on Good Friday/Easter Sunday. You ARE reconciled to God—whether you acknowledge it or not. Know it, acknowledge it." What's still unfinished is reconciliation *coram hominibus*, getting people to treat one another the way God in Christ has already treated the world. In the language of nature and grace: Grace has been showered superabundantly in Christ upon the world of nature. All that is needed is for people—all people—to learn of the RCD grace-gift already given and then act accordingly in the world, i.e., the RCH calling.ES: God was in Christ reconciling the world unto himself. Yes, indeed! And it was indeed God's grace, grace alone.. But "done deal" it is not. When the grace-gift is not trusted, the distruster is NOT graced. Is worldwide "trust" in RCD a done deal? Hardly. The key for worldlings to be reconciled to God—in one of Paul's favored metaphors—is to be "in Christ." Once the gift is offered, they need to "get IN on it." Worldlings get "in Christ" by faith, by trusting the Reconciler. Folks who aren't Christ-trusters aren't (yet) God-reconciled. 'Fact is, in Paul's own prose in that classic reconciliation text of 2 Cor. 5, the *coram deo* status of folks not yet "in Christ" is that God is still "counting their trespasses."

That is not the language of reconciliation. In Paul's vocabulary it is "law," not "promise," that is operative when God is counting trespasses. That is the God-relationship of all not-yet-reconciled sinners—willynilly their perception or opinion of it. Therefore Paul entreats his readers ("God making his appeal through us") "BE reconciled to God." If for them—these Corinthians Christians—their RCD was already a done deal, Paul's imperative would be nonsense.

In both of the two reconciliation titles referred to above, RS lays out a five-point paradigm for "The Christian Understanding

of Reconciliation” he proposes. Yes, it “favors the Catholic position” which “focuses on the love of God poured out upon us as a result of the reconciliation God has effected in Christ. Here the emphasis is on the new creation. If there is a classic location for this theology, it is 2 Corinthians 5:17-20.”

[RS designates Romans 5:6-11 as the Protestant “classic” text, with its “emphasis on reconciliation as the result of Christ’s atoning death and the justification by faith. By focusing on the atoning death this position has the advantage of seeing reconciliation in continuity with the saving act of God through history, especially in the theology of the covenant.” Sounds like Calvin and surely not Luther’s sweet-swap to me. My claim is that 2Cor.5 is the text of the Augsburg Confessors for reconciliation. We’re glad Schreiter thinks it’s central for Roman theology too. But there’s more there than he has shown us so far.]

Schreiter’s five theses.

- “First of all, reconciliation is the work of God, who initiates and completes in us reconciliation through Christ. . . .
- “The second point in a Christian understanding of reconciliation [is] reconciliation is more a spirituality rather than a strategy. . . .
- “Third, the experience of reconciliation makes of both victim and wrongdoer a new creation (2 Cor. 5:17). . . .
- “Fourth, the process of reconciliation that creates the new humanity is to be found in the story of the passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ [in (1992) number four becomes: “the new narrative that overcomes the narrative of the lie is the story of the passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.”]
- “Fifth, the process of reconciliation will be fulfilled



only with the complete consummation of the world by God in Christ. [(1992) "Reconciliation is a multi-dimensional reality. Reconciliation involves not just God's reconciling activity. It involves coming to terms with the otherness and the alienation that situations of violence and oppression have created . . . . this, put rather succinctly, seems to summarize major Christian insights into the process of reconciliation. It is these that form the background to the ministry of reconciliation, a ministry in which Paul exults so exuberantly in 2 Cor. 5:20."]

When Schreiter proceeds to expound these theses, RCD isn't there. It is significant by its absence, most patently in thesis #3 above where "both victim and wrongdoer become a new creation." That cannot possibly be applied to both God and sinner. How can the creator ever become a new creation? New creation happens when RCH occurs. But RCD is something qualitatively different. Schreiter misses the magnitude of the RCD in 2 Cor 5. All the attention is given to RCH.

Au contraire.

I must confess that I can't find a word about RCH in this classic 2 Cor 5 text. Major pieces of RCD are ignored in Schreiter's "Christian Understanding of Reconciliation." Such as, God "counting trespasses" with those unreconciled, the sin-for-righteousness swap, the mind-boggling claim that the divine person of Christ is "made sin" in the process of the sweet swap, Christ's appropriation of human sin in the sin-for-righteousness swap being the "reason" for a crucified Messiah, the core of the new creation being that a trespasser now has a new righteous (=non-trespasser) connection with the creator, and that the "ministry of reconciliation" and the "message of reconciliation entrusted to us" is to "beseech" fellow

trespassers to “be reconciled to God.” RCH is an other agenda.

RS doesn’t attend to these fundamental themes of RCD in 2 Cor 5. For him the RCD in 2 Cor 5 is a “paradigm . . . metaphor. . . parallel . . . story . . . larger narrative . . . lesson to be learned . . . it gives insight” ( his constantly used terms) for the task of RCH in our conflicted world. Primary for RS is that God’s RCD shows us how to do our own RCH. Example: “we must not ‘count trespasses’ anymore than God has.” Which prompts this Lutheran “Aargh!”— Has God NEVER counted trespasses? Was the sweet-swap at Calvary an event that God was ALWAYS doing? Paul didn’t think so.

Schreiter and Schroeder read the scriptures with different lenses. That means the issue is hermeneutics. His lenses for reading scripture are nature/grace hermeneutics, mine law/promise. With those lenses 2 Cor 5 is “perfectly clear.” God either “counts trespasses” (aka “law”) or he “sweet-swaps” them (aka “promise”). Calvary is the crossover.

Don’t Lutherans care about RCH? Indeed they do. Lutheran theology has much to say about RCH in our fractured world. But you don’t need RCD to get on with the RCH job. Folks with hearts hanging on other promises can take on the RCH agenda, and do indeed do so. Christ-promise-trusters can be their allies in the project, for it is a common project.

Lutheran theology approaches the RCH agenda like this: the frazzled un-reconciled world (God’s old creation) needs first of all God’s left-hand intervention to “preserve” [key term] it from complete implosion. Humans not yet enjoying RCD are still God’s human agents, actually under assignment to live out God’s “law of preservation,” using resources already available in the old creation distinct from Christ’s new creation.

That doesn’t mean that the old creation is fundamentally god-

less. It's not that it is un-godly out there, but it is "un-gospel-ly." Promise-proclamation and promise-trusting are not the daily routine of the "old" creation. What is going on there is rather God's own "other" work in the world apart from Christ, the work of God's left hand, as Luther often labeled it.

The resources of God's left hand are already IN the "old" creation for maintaining and—where fractured—restoring peace among peoples. Human moral reason, debit-credit equity processes, fairness, functioning structures of recompense and retribution—yes, even human compassion—are already built in to the old creation. These God-given resources preserve that old creation and continue holding humans accountable—to each other, and finally to their creator. These are givens already available to reconcile human conflicts with no reference to Christ. That is patently so wherever the Christ-promise is not present for the simple reason that it is not being trusted.

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## **Part IV**

### **Sweet-swap Reconciliation and Human Identities. Some Theses.**

1. RCD changes sinners into new creations. The very term "new creation" is a radical new identity. The sweet-swap of RCD is a humongous change of identity—from sinner to righteous, from slaves to free children of God. There are other NT metaphors, all of them speaking of the new God-relationship that comes with RCD. All human identities arise relationally. At the root of them all is the God-relationship and the identity that comes from that.
2. In RCD it is God's own self who bestows on us the new identity. God's beloved Son is the one who does it. He assumes our identity and gives us his. When we trust the

*offer, we have it.*

- 3. Already as creatures in God's old creation, all humankind shares in a plethora of identities bestowed from God's left hand.*
- 4. Promise-trusters—yes, only promise-trusters—share in the new right-hand identities. But their “old creation” identities do not disappear.*
- 5. Luther regularly called these multiple identities in the old creation as “callings.” Wherever God has linked me to some other person—parent, sibling, children, fellow-workers, fellow-citizens, neighbor—there arises a “calling,” an identity wherein God calls me to be God's sort of parent, sibling, citizen . . . in that explicit relationship.*
- 6. Christ-promise-trusters get a change of identity in their relationship with God. This change—grounded in Christ's exchange—does not replace the creator-given identities already on hand. Instead it constitutes a new identity replacing an old one at the divine-human interface. Biblical metaphors for this: Child of God, righteous, redeemed—and yes, of course, “reconciled to God.”*
- 7. Luther was especially fascinated by one of the NT's favorite descriptors for new Christian identity, namely, the move from slavery to freedom. The citation above from 1520 where he speaks of the “Joyful exchange” comes from his classic treatise on Christian Freedom. He articulated that “reconciliation-freedom” into the manifold daily individual identities/callings that each person has in family, gender, nation, vocation, social location, education, citizenship, etc.*
- 8. The dilemma of sinners in all of their manifold callings is that they are not “free” in exercising them. Primary “un-freedom” is that sinners are always in “bondage” to self-justification as they live out their multiple*

relational identities. Thus they are not “free” for 100% focus on serving “the other” in every calling. An “incurvatus in se” infects their lives—always and ever seeking to have “at least something” of their life-in-relationships come back to benefit them, to justify them. In Christ’s sweet-swap the sinner’s justification-agenda is fully covered. It is no longer a concern. The neighbor-in-relation can be given 100% attention. To be free from self-justification is freedom indeed. And every person-in-relation to that justified sinner is beneficiary.

9. Thus this new identity as “already justified coram deo” does not replace any of the prior “old creation” identities, but to make these already existing identities and relationships the turf for continuing the “ministry of reconciliation,” keeping the “mission” going wherein “God was in Christ reconciling the world.”
10. These relational identities provide the “mission field” for every Christian person’s carrying out the “ministry of reconciliation” that has been “given to us” in the new creation identity. God “entrusts the message of reconciliation” to just such agents. Their mission: “As ambassadors for Christ . . . we entreat you: Be reconciled to God. The new identity of the sweet-swap is also for you.”
11. For those who take the offer, take the swap, and thus take on the RCD’s new identity as their own, the consequences for RCH are carried out in the “old creation” identities of their callings. As they carry out their new-creation identity “in, with and under” the rubrics of their multiple old-creation identities, the Platzregen, the Christ-Gospel, is on the move to new turfs where it had not been before. Their home-turf, their native locations—and vocations in these

*locations—constitute the primal mission field. Their local “mission” is cosmic: God’s new creation in RCD “subverting” God’s old one with both RCD and RCH.*

- 12. Their primary “mission field” is thus local, yet cosmic. They are ambassadors for God’s new creation (RCD) “subverting” God’s old one. New for them is that they can pursue their manifold “left-hand” callings “in freedom.” New also is their partnership in God’s “right-hand” reconciliation operation. So they “entreat” their fellow worldlings: “Be reconciled to God.” It’s an ambidextrous way of life. It arises from being cross-eyed.*

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## **Thoughts occasioned by reading Robert Bertram, A TIME FOR CONFESSING, by William R Burrows.**

Colleagues,

Here is the second of four reviews of Bob Bertram’s book that will, deo volente, eventually show up on ThTh posts. [One is yet to come from Rudolf Keller, German Lutheran pastor-theologian in Bavaria, one of the keynote speakers at the 2007 Crossings “Honest to God” conference. And then one by Bishop Francisco Claver, S.J., from the Philippines. Claver was a personal friend of Bob’s and is a key confessor in Bob’s chapter 6.]

Now to William R. Burrows. Bill Burrows will this very weekend

at the annual meeting of the American Society of Missiology (Techny Towers, Chicago) take the gavel as newly-elected ASM president. For decades he and I have been arm-wrestling mission theology at these get-togethers—occasionally over beers—and often via cyberspace when we get back home. Bill has been managing editor of Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York, since 1989. Under his aegis Orbis has become—far and away—the world’s major publisher of mission theology. A former member of the Roman Catholic Society of the Divine Word, he was ordained in Rome in 1971 where he was pursuing a licentiate in theology (STL = Sacrae Theologiae Licentia. Literally, the license, aka permission, to teach sacred theology) at the Gregorian University. He worked as a theology teacher and rural missionary in Papua New Guinea from 1972 – 1977 and obtained a doctorate in theology from the University of Chicago Divinity School in 1987, where he worked with Langdon Gilkey, David Tracy, Anne Carr, and Joseph Kitagawa on the Roman Catholic doctrine on other religious Ways.

I sang a Te Deum on first reading of his “thoughts” about Bob’s book. Don’t be surprised if the same thing happens to you.

Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder

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**Thoughts occasioned by reading Robert Bertram, A TIME FOR CONFESSING, edited by Michael Hoy (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008).**

**By William R Burrows.**

Driving down I-95 to a conference in Princeton, New Jersey, on a Sunday morning, I pushed the button to get “Weekend Edition” on

the New York public radio station. I was too early, so I switched from WNYC to WQXR, the classical music station of The New York Times. Instead of Verdi or Bach, I got The Lutheran Hour. Snared by the stirring anthem, I stayed tuned and was then seduced by the sonorous voice of Pastor Kenneth Klaus speaking on the lectionary text for the day, Matthew 9: 9-13, the story of Jesus and Matthew the tax collector. Later the same morning, quite a different sermon on the same text was delivered from Trinity Episcopal Church on Wall Street. The evening before, attending the confirmation of my Godson Charlie McNellis in Liberty, New York, I heard quite another version of the same parable from Bishop Dennis Sullivan, an auxiliary bishop of the Catholic Archdiocese of New York.

In the back of my mind, as I listened to all three sermons, was the article you are now reading. It was not coming together. Why? The key to why Robert Bertram's A TIME FOR CONFESSING is important, I had concluded, was in a short passage near the end of the book, where Bertram catches the dynamic at play in the story of Jesus and the tax collector brilliantly when he writes of the needed reconciliation (in the sense of making "at one", overcoming estrangement) of God and humanity as follows:

*The opposites are, on the one hand, "the world," which in all honesty God finds infuriating. On the other hand is God "himself" who, though he yearns to love this world, yearns to love it not cheaply or permissively but in all honesty. That is a quandary. How to reconcile these opposites? (Bertram, p. 167)*

In Bishop Sullivan's sermon, the story is used to illustrate the sort of person Jesus was and the effect he had on people. He says to Matthew, "Follow me," and Matthew follows. Similarly, the confirmandi were advised to model their lives on Matthew's by following Jesus and reaching out to outcasts. The lesson is



fundamentally a moral one. Sitting among the confirmandi, as Charlie's sponsor, I could see that the good bishop's sermon wasn't quite working.

In the Episcopal church version, the story showed God's unconditional love to humankind and invited listeners to do likewise. I don't recall all the details, but the underlying theme in a very well-delivered, cogent homily was that we could find within us the power to reach out to the suffering, and release the power of love. The lesson is again a moral one. For me the problem is not God's love, but the fact that deep down I know I don't deserve it and all those I know who think they deserve unconditional love don't know themselves as others know them. I just do not see human beings as all that lovable. I really don't. Attractive objects of desire? But many are not attractive as objects of desire. We tend to reject them and in that very rejection one sees the gulf between God's love and the desire we often mistake for love in its fullness. Eros is good in and of itself. Let us not be distracted by that red herring. But it is not the agape that is modeled in the drama leading up to, on, and away from Golgotha to the resurrection. Yes, many are attractive and often so. But deserving of unconditional love if they're not working at becoming more authentic? Not really. And when I read both the Hebrew Bible and the Christian Bible, it doesn't seem to me that God feels that way either. Love, truth, and justice belong together.

At least both the Catholic and the Anglican resisted the impulse to talk about the problem whether the Matthew of the story is the author of Matthew's Gospel. I have lost track of how many times I have heard that one discussed. I have long tired of hearing tours through textual commentaries masquerading as preaching.

In pastor Klaus's version, the church is a community of forgiven

sinners, many of whom find it hard to break with their pasts, sometimes unable to admit into their midst “unrespectable” people, even after they’ve turned to Christ. The church itself is too often too respectable, a far cry from a community that knows we are all and remain sinners. But the ultimate point of Klaus’s story was to help people understand how God accepts us, in spite of our remaining unlovable.

In the language of Robert Bertram, God finds us as individuals and as a world “infuriating.” Because of Jesus, he stays his anger. For the Lutheran version of the story, in the strand that holds Bertram’s book together, human beings need to reconcile themselves with God, align themselves with Jesus the Christ, to become a “new creation,” and to make a break with the side of their lives that God finds infuriating. There is a moral component to the message, but even deeper are three theological points, all rooted in the biblical narratives:

1. The world as a whole and each of us as an individual is off the track, infuriating the author of life by our refusal to obey the law of life. That is to say we violate the order of creation, which, if respected, would make the world a paradise. Disobedience to that law or deceiving oneself by thinking that one’s adherence to that law – either in its “natural” form in the structure of creation or in its legal form in the Scriptures of Israel – will make it right with God makes us, instead, part of what infuriates God.
2. Jesus comes into the world to show and embody for humanity the way to turn to God with our whole being. In the process he infuriates those who have a stake in the present order. As a result, the leaders of both the Roman imperial and the Jewish religious authority execute him. The masses who acclaimed him scatter, thus revealing their fickleness and inability to commit themselves to the way

of Jesus. And these scattering followers of Jesus – both Jews and non-Jews – represent the inconstancy of human beings. In narrative form they embody what Lonergan, using philosophical language, terms “our incapacity for sustained development,” [Bernard Lonergan, *INSIGHT: A STUDY OF HUMAN UNDERSTANDING* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1958), p. 630] despite our best resolutions. In Lonergan’s analysis of human being and history, recognition of this radical incapacity sets up the possibility of embracing a “supernatural” solution to our problem.

3. The New Testament proposes Jesus as this solution and in its account sees the life, teaching, indeed the very person of Jesus and the manner of his death as that which, in Bertram’s words, “unveil” human unrighteousness and absorb the wrath of God, for our sake (2 Cor 5: 21) (pp. 163-64), a Pauline text that is central to the interpretation of the Biblical narratives of Jesus in their totality.

To see things this way, it should be said, one needs to acknowledge that the letters of the Apostle Paul are prior to the rest of the New Testament and provide the key for interpreting the narrative strands of the four gospels. Bertram does not argue that case at length, but his writing presupposes it. Neither will I argue it here, but if Saul was not given a special vocation in the manner narrated in Acts 9: 1-31 and in Galatians 1: 13-24, then all that follows will make no sense.

The appendix of *A TIME FOR CONFESSING* may be the best place for someone who is not an expert in the intricacies of Lutheran attempts to bring this dimension of the gospel to the church. Although I am a Catholic, a number of years ago I came to the conclusion that Brother Martin was right about this in the sixteenth century and that only by making this case convincingly

to contemporary Christians could the church retrieve its authentic identity.

But we have a problem. And a short citation from Bertram illustrates it perfectly. Bertram observes that:

*It is in the history of Jesus the Christ, says Paul, that this infuriating world at last becomes honestly lovable to God, "a new creation." How so? By God's "not counting [sinners'] trespasses against them" but instead "for our sake" making Christ "to be sin who knew no sin" (2 Cor 5: 17, 19, 21) (p.167).*

The church has a problem getting this doctrine generally accepted, at least in the West. It is increasingly difficult to make the case to people that unconverted humanity (i.e., humanity "not turned" to God through Christ) is so seriously flawed as to deserve God's fury. When one talks of an originating sin that has us all in its grips, the theologically well informed mutter something about the Genesis story being a myth and St Augustine having gotten the church off on the wrong foot because of his hang-ups on sexuality. That is followed by the question of how non-Christians can be condemned. At about which point, the conversation peters out. (I resist here the temptation to follow the red herring question of how non-Christians are saved, although I have spent more of my life pondering that question than studying Lutheran theology.)

Throughout his book, Bertram wonderfully employs synonyms for off-putting (i.e., to "moderns") biblical language that depicts a wrathful God. His rhetorical strategy is a skillful outflanking maneuver. Speaking of a God who finds the world "infuriating" is one of his most successful. Still, the teaching is hard to swallow. Nevertheless, Bertram will not give it up. He knows that the Scriptures give indicting testimony to warrant

the charge that there is something fundamentally infuriating to God about the world, its individuals, and its cultures. They have slipped their moorings, and Jesus the Christ is the one who can help us find those moorings in recognizing the truth about ourselves and our personhood, which have been damaged by straying from God. Such has been the triumph of a curious blend of pessimism about structures that oppress and optimism that we'll eventually get things right- whether through some form of therapy, pharmacology, social work, or politics – that the notion that the first step towards doing so is confession of sin and our powerlessness to make things right seems downright weird to “moderns.” Me? Guilty? Saying that the message that the embrace of Christ in trusting faith is the solution seems not so much wrong as irrelevant. The skeptic, seeing the bumper sticker proclaiming that “Jesus is the answer” scoffs and asks, “What is the question?”

Having read Bertram's book, I think he's basically right about biblical anthropology. And then – knowing how we swim in a sea of relativism – I ask, “So what?”

In our age, the skepticism of educated elites in Western cultures about the reality of a transcendent universe has migrated downwards to comprise the intellectual furniture of large swathes of the ordinary citizenry. The question whether a church is “valid” has increasingly become the question of whether the church is on the right side of fundamental moral and ethical divides as societies rapidly change.

In 1520, when Pope Leo X issued “Exsurge Domine,” condemning 41 theses taken from Martin Luther's works, the fundamental soteriological horizon was clearer. Luther was an easy target for the pope, because he seemed to attack the foundations on which the church was built as the sole mediator of the salvation that everyone desired. Luther, of course, was trying to show the

church that all the accretions of centuries had obscured the soteriology of the gospel of and about Jesus and ourselves. In today's world, at least in large swathes of the West, the notion that a "reign of God" is a deeper and transcending REALITY – the invisible but true marrow of the visible historical world – is a hard sell. Religion lives in the realm of opinion. Science and politics deal with facts. In this framework, the Christian church (and any other religious tradition) is judged useful only if it contributes to human well being in the here and now as defined in this-worldly terms.

Bertram knows this. The seven chapters that precede the appendix that I find more compelling than these chapters themselves show the ups and downs of what the gospel means within the church and when the church tries to illuminate the world with the gospel. Indeed, Bertram's book is a marvelous "tour d'horizon" of the Reformers' attempts to confess / profess the gospel as the middle ages were drawing to a close. He relates that dynamic to the black church in the civil rights era in the U.S., to the confessing church of the Nazi era, the struggle against apartheid, and the people-power struggle of the Philippines. It all introduces the question in chapter 7, "When Is the Church a Confessional Movement?"

I detect a plaintive note when Bertram notes, "But the biggest dilemma of all in our confessional movements, I believe, is their relative rightness or wrongness" (p. 147). Exactly. And the problems of relativity and ambiguity bedevil every attempt to make any historical "tempus" an opportunity for a "confessio" that totally and unambiguously transcends history.

If I read Bertram right, Luther and his companions did everything possible to call the church to recognize the essential dynamics of the gospel. Coming at them from one direction, the gospel is a promise to be embraced "sola fide,

sola gratia," and "sola scriptura." Coming at them from another direction, the gospel represents God's PROMISE to save those who embrace Christ, thereby acknowledging him as the one who has brought God's forgiveness to the world by accepting the death that humankind's sin deserved. The story of Matthew's call in Matthew 9 is a perfect illustration of what happens in the post-Easter church. No matter how bad your sins are (Matthew's were both social and individual), you need to answer the call, "Follow me," and when you do, you are on the way as someone right with God. You are forgiven in an instant but you will appropriate what that forgiveness MEANS through the rest of your life as you walk in the Spirit with Jesus. That is the way of sanctification in which one is led by the Spirit to embody Christ, to live in him, and to become one with God, as he was.

We can do nothing to merit that forgiveness nor the divine promise to be our future. Instead, the believer acknowledges the radical need to be reconciled with God (2 Cor 5: 20-21) and accepts the reconciliation offered in Jesus the Christ. The true church is the one that manifests and proclaims this promise in word and sacrament. That is the essential criterion. Other things MAY be compatible "adiaphora" that can help stir the heart of the sinners or help them trust themselves at ever deeper levels to the grace mediated by Christ, but they are only valid to the extent they bring one to God. When they occlude the basic dynamic of – or response to – the gospel, they need either to be eliminated or purified.

For the Roman authorities at the close of the middle ages and the beginning of the modern era, Luther's challenge involved paring away a thousand years of customs, habits, and ways of expressing the earthly pilgrimage of humanity so dramatically encapsulated in Dante Alighieri's *COMMEDIA DIVINA*. It seemed too great a price to pay. One suspects, though, that the part of the price that popes, cardinals, and bishops found too dear was the

kind of re-shaping of the papal, episcopal, and sacerdotal orders necessary to make it clear that the forgiveness of sin accomplished by the cross of Christ could be accessed simply by trusting the promise mediated by the preached word and the two essential sacraments – baptism and eucharist. The entire system of mediation via the church was at stake, and with it the social order of Christendom. Leaders would be ejected from their positions of power and prestige as embodiments of God's ordering of the cosmos.

Since the Enlightenment, the shift from judging which church authentically re-presented Christ has moved inexorably in the direction of seeing historical events and challenges as defining whether the church is worth keeping. If the challenge is the new conditions faced by industrialization and the rise of cities with their impoverished workers, the criterion of authenticity becomes whether the church is on the side of the new proletariat. If the challenge is restructuring society in the light of new insights into gender and sexual identity, is the church on the side of the emancipation of women and homosexuals? Or, in Bertram's case, learning from the confessing movement in Hitlerite Germany, from the black church in the struggle against racism, learning from the African National Congress during the struggle against Apartheid.

In Bertram, one finds a finely tuned theological mind seeing how each of these represents a different and important sort of confessing moment. He uses discerningly the words of Paul Ricoeur, who speaks of the situation that occurs when history's currents bring us to see "the profound unity between testimony about facts and events, and the testimony about meaning and truth"(p. 58). Christians may not overcome the rule that every historical action is ambiguous, but neither can they deny that history presents us with situations where the genuinity of our embrace of Christ in his fullness and the realizing of the "new



humanity” that faith is to create requires us to act decisively in history to make God’s righteousness visible.

To that extent, the post-Enlightenment challenge to bear fruit flows from an inner-gospel imperative. Nevertheless, to accept the challenge on the grounds our cultures propose, rather than by acting from within the circle of faith leading us more deeply into the mystery of the Kingdom has risks. It is easy to avoid taking sufficiently into account the paradoxical nature of revelation of the human plight and the gospel’s salvation from it in three areas: (a) the history of Israel, (b) the life and teaching of Jesus, and (c) the reversal of values both realized and symbolized in the crucifixion of Jesus. The history of both Israel and Jesus are lessons that – as important as historical challenges are – the reality of the Kingdom is far more elusive and paradoxical than human liberation and progress.

The human situation mirrored in the parables involves, for example, Jesus speaking of noxious weeds and good grain growing together as history moves toward its denouement in the Kingdom (Matthew 13: 24-30). Augustine translates that parable into the image of an earthly and heavenly city existing together till the end of time. In the age immediately before Luther, the thought of Bonaventure represented yet another attempt to image the ambiguity of the intermingling of good and evil in the midst of history’s vicissitudes, unifying his theology around the image of Francis of Assisi modeling the behavior of the disciple in the midst of this ambiguity.

Luther provides the touchstone of Bertram’s book. The subtext is the story of an historical tragedy. A confessing movement aimed at bringing the whole Western church into the mission of proposing a sharpened vision of gospel to all humankind becomes – against the will of Luther – an alternate, separating church protesting the abuses of the “ecclesia mater” [mother church].

Had Catholics in the 16th century learned from the “confessio” of the Reformers “illius temporis” [of that time], the tragedies of mixing empire and the cross in Ibero-America might not have occurred. Had the Americans not taken up the Puritans’ identification of its burgeoning colonizing of our continent in the terms of Christendom exclusivism, the crimes that the citizens of the United States committed against the Indians in the pursuit of the U.S.’s “Manifest Destiny” might not have occurred.

But they did. And there was no confessing church decrying those crimes. Both Ibero-America and Anglo-America failed to understand how encumbered with “adiaphora” their imperial and colonial mission projects were. They thought they were presenting the gospel, yet in both its Catholic and Protestant versions, the message was so encumbered with the imbalance of power and Euro-American cultural assumptions that one suspects the gospel was not presented either in the Augustana version Bertram so clearly lays out or in interculturally appropriate terms that Native Americans could grasp.

The Lutheran confessional movement was and is an attempt to get the church to attend to the Gospel as a promise of forgiveness. It is based on the premise that unrepentant humanity deserves the fate meted out to Jesus for falling short of our nature and the fundamental law expressed in that nature and revealed in the history of Abraham’s descendants, encapsulated in the Bible. Brother Martin’s eureka moment, as he saw the relationship and distinction between gospel and law, was a gift to the whole church, which the larger part of the church spurned. That teaching is based conceptually in the Pauline portion of the New Testament, teaching that Jesus has absorbed God’s anger for our sake, and it is a radical teaching.

Against that background and the high stakes drama portrayed in

the gospel narratives, medieval Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy created an entire system of mediatory structures to give anxious people confidence that they would be saved. In effect, the visible church, in all its splendor and totality both communicated the notion that human beings were sinners who deserved the pains of hell and surrounded the faithful with sacraments and sacramentals that were testimonies of God's mercy. Brother Martin, however, realized that people had come to trust in the rituals while avoiding the biblical truth that what God truly desired was a loving faith and trust springing up from within the depths of the heart, a deeply personal embrace of the crucified one. Yet both the rituals and the sacerdotalization of the church's office holders, on which the rituals depended for validity, were occluding the gospel.

Bertram is clearly a transitional figure in American Christian life, and the electronic community he gave rise to in Thursday Theology and the insights of CRUX are clearly important. As I read this book, I realized that those he touched in the Crossings community are attempting to make confessional theology more than a denomination's distinct theology. The goal is to make it a confessing movement within the entire "oikumene" of Christ's followers.

The history of Christianity in America gives grounds for both hope and caution for assessing how that task is being accomplished. As a Roman Catholic who has been affected by writings coming from within the Crossings community, but also from the reflections of Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI, as well as a new sort of postcritical exegesis modeled in N. T. Wright, Luke Timothy Johnson, and James D. G. Dunn, the crossroad we are at is very well summed up by the same Lonergan I quoted earlier. He says our crisis "is a crisis not of faith but of culture. There has been no new revelation from on high to replace the revelation through Christ Jesus. There has been

written no new Bible, and there has been founded no new church to link us with him.” [Bernard J. Lonergan, COLLECTION (New York: Herder and Herder, 1967), p. 266.]

Lonergan’s view is that we are facing the collapse of the classical culture that nurtured both medieval Catholicism and Lutheran attempts to purify it. I agree. In the grey noise of information overload that the world suffers from today, perhaps the greatest challenge to the church’s ability to confess the gospel in ways that the world will find relevant will be finding ways in which to make the possibility of transcendence plausible. And in meeting that challenge, I suspect there is no solution that falls short of embodying the task that Luther began. Darrell Gudorf calls the task one of nurturing the “continuing conversion of the church.”

The Crossings Community, especially Michael Hoy and Ed Schroeder, should be commended for keeping the witness of Robert Bertram before us, for it is to the continuing conversion of the church that Bertram summons us in the name of Christ.

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## **Continuing last week’s post: “A Mixed Report Card on ‘Damn is Not a Dirty Word’ and ‘Preaching from OT Texts’”**

Colleagues,

Last week’s ThTh 521 got us this far in responses to: Preaching

from OT Texts.

Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder

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6. Several pointed questions came from someone who's new, he says, to Crossings stuff, but (mostly) likes what he's reading. However, there were items in my reading of the Old Testament where he found Biblical texts saying YES to w here I said NO—and vice versa.

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*You say in ThTh 518: "My own view is that this text about the decimation of Jericho is a text of Hebrews committing mass murder and genocide—the theology of the Deuteronomist, but not the theology of Yahweh." I am trying to reconcile that with what you said in an email to me about God involved in everything that happens. You said: "Key Bible passage for Luther was Deut. 32:39, where God claims to be making 'everything' happen. We either have to confess ONE God for everything, or else two gods—one for the good stuff and one for the bad stuff."*

If God makes everything happen, couldn't we just as easily say that Israel was the instrument of God's judgment on the Canaanites, a people whom He had cursed (Gen 9:25, Lev 18:25)?

If Deut 32:39 is key, how about the rest of it? The context is pretty bloodthirsty and genocidal, esp. v. 43, "He will...take vengeance on his adversaries; he will repay those who hate him, and cleanse the land for his people." If the verse is key, is not the context also? Can you accept the one and not the other?

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EHS: This may sound far-fetched to begin with, but please hang on.

Two issues are involved here. At least. One is the theology at work in those “curse, kill, totally exterminate” passages in the OT narratives of the conquest of Canaan. The other is Luther’s call for us to distinguish between hidden-God and revealed-God in our reading the Bible—especially the OT.

The two texts you quote, Gen 9:25 and Lev. 18:25, are samples of deuteronomic theology, in my understanding. The normal deuteronomic principle is “law-abiding Israel” is blessed by God, “law-breaking Israel” comes under God’s condemnation. Non-Israelite “nations,” the Goyim, are cursed from the git-go because they never have been law-abiding. No wonder, they never had a Sinai revelation. How could they even possibly be law-abiding? [There is no way that I can read the Sinai “contract” in Exodus 20 other than this: “commandment-keepers get rewarded,” and “commandment-breakers get punished.” No forgiveness for sinners at Sinai.] Contrary to that is the Yahwist theology running through these same Pentateuch texts, one highpoint of which is God’s later covenant with David (2 Samuel 7) where “forgiveness of sins” is specifically put into the contract.

The difference between Yahwist and Deuteronomic is already seen back in the Cain and Abel story, where Cain, the founder of agriculture and city-civilization, is the “Ur-canaanite.” He’s the Ur-bad-guy—as are all Canaanites—killing his nomadic herdsman brother (=the Ur-Israelite). He’s under God’s condemnation, yes, but note the “mercy-mark”—very non-Deuteronomistic—God gives to preserve his life. AND the sanction God sets: “whoever kills Cain will suffer a sevenfold punishment.” So killing Cain-connected Canaanites is contra-

Yahwist, even if it is Kosher-deuteronomist. By that axiom, Canaanite genocide carried out by the Israelites merits sevenfold genocide of Israel.

Canaanites come specifically under the specs of God's mercy-covenant to Abraham, where not only he and his offspring, but "in you all the families of the earth [Canaanites included] shall be blessed."

It seems to me that deuteronomist theology—because it is so contra-Yahwist at the center—is in large chunks "man-made" to justify Israel's behavior when they abandoned God's Abrahamic covenant God with them. Especially this "wipe out the Canaanites" business. You can't trust the Abraham covenant and then draw genocidal conclusions. Canaanites are "one of all the families of the earth," thus candidates for blessing. Sure they're sinners, but so is every Israelite. That's why both people-groups need the mercy-covenant where sinners can be forgiven.

One OT prof (Missouri Synod even) told me this a couple of years ago: Ed, why do you think there are those passages in the OT where God tells Israel: "Don't sacrifice your first-born children to me or any other deity"? Why was God saying that? Because that is exactly what the Israelites were doing! Ditto for all the laundry lists of prohibitions against gosh-awful "Canaanite" practices. That's what they were doing. The Israelites were living like Canaanites and using their legalist theology to justify it all. Ditto for genocide. It's a Canaanite custom. So legalist theology baptizes it and says: Our God says we can do it too.

But the God of Abraham had said something else.

Possibly better expressed, it is analogous to the theology that St. Paul confronts in his opponents in Galatia, the Galatian

Judaizers, where once more God's unique mercy-promise-covenant with Abraham is the touchstone. In Galatia the Judaizers were Christ-confessors, but when push came to shove, they grabbed for the law as their final justification—forgetting that it was precisely from the law's curse (always the law's last word on everybody stuck with being a sinner) that Christ had set them free.

If this sounds bizarre, my claim is that I'm practicing Lutheran exegesis—distinguishing law from promise in these texts.

Yahweh is also the voice who speaks in the law, when the law is left to do its own God-given work. Which is what? If we don't see it in OT texts, St. Paul makes it perfectly clear that the "Law was our taskmaster [=critic] to drive us to Christ," to the Abrahamic mercy-covenant. But Yahweh is not the voice speaking in the legalist distortion of his word of Law. All the more so when that legalism (as it must do) deserts the mercy of the Abrahamic promise covenant and the Davidic forgiveness-covenant. That is the constant drumbeat of the Hebrew prophets—and also of Jesus as the Gospels present him. And the rest of the NT writers follow in that train.

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My interrogator continues:

You say, "Rahab gets saved, but not sola fide." What about Heb 11:31: "By faith, the prostitute Rahab did not perish"?

You say, "There is no promise-trusting that I can find in Joshua." Isn't the book about how God remains faithful to his promises (The Promised Land) and blesses those who trust in those promises? Barry Bandsra says about the book of Joshua in his book, *Reading the Old Testament*, "the Deuteronomistic historian framed the book with a theology of promise...On this



promise, projected into the future again by the exiles who heard this story, Israel based its hope.”

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EHS response: Touche! on Rahab. Not so, I think, on Joshua.

I’d forgotten that passage in Hebrews. Rahab also gets mentioned as exemplary in the NT book of James. These are the only places where she’s mentioned in the NT. But they don’t exactly agree. Hebrews says Rahab was saved by faith. James says she was “justified by works.” [Is it only a coincidence that both of these NT books are on the “antilegomena” list in the early church, namely, books that some folks in those days said should not be included in the NT canon?]

“Faith” in the book of Hebrews is given a definition that is not complete, “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”(11:1) Missing in this definition, seems to me, is the “Abrahamic” element. Faith is trusting God’s promise. So what was Rahab’s faith? When you get to Rahab back in the book of Joshua, she does confess that from all they’ve heard about Israel’s bloody victories, Israel’s God is bigger than Jericho’s gods and that Jericho’s destruction is assured. But the “faith” she confesses sounds a lot like despair. “As soon as we heard this, our hearts melted, and there was no courage left in any of us because of you. The LORD your God is indeed God in heaven above and on earth below.” Is this Abrahamic-style promise-trusting? Well . . . maybe. The de facto promise she trusts is the one offered by the two spies. “Since you saved us, we’ll promise to save you and your family when the walls come tumbling down.” And when the walls do come tumbling down, Rahab’s household survives, but every other living thing—human and animal—is genocided. Is that Abrahamic theology in action or Canaanite theology in action?

By faith Rahab survived that holocaust, but the Hebrews writer doesn't give Abrahamic grounds for either the faith or the survival. Rather it was "because she had received the spies in peace."

But let's say Rahab did survive by trusting a promise, possibly even a promise from God. The Hebrews writer in the NT doesn't stop there, but asks: "which" promises are being trusted in the many "by faith" examples cited? Some promises—even from God—are not as good as other promises. The Hebrews writer lumps the OT faith-promise-trusting under the rubric of an "old covenant," even calls it "faulty." Now that Jesus has come, "the mediator of a BETTER covenant, which has been enacted through BETTER promises," God's own self "has made the first covenant obsolete. And what is obsolete and growing old will soon disappear." (Heb. 8)

The "by faith" hyped in those many examples in Hebrews 11 (Rahab included) is still incomplete because the covenant involved is itself "faulty." As the writer moves into chapter 12 we see why. It lacks the "something better that God has provided . . . in Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of OUR faith." That reference to "our faith" is contrasted with "all these [previously mentioned, who] though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised." That "something better" at the center of "our faith," is what these ancients too needed "to be made perfect." Abraham is the super-star in the long list. Yet his "better" faith is linked to his hook-up with Melchizedek, the "better" high-priest, qualitatively different from the Levitical ones (stuck with their "faulty" covenant). And, of course, that Melchizedek, mystery priest of old, is directly hooked up to Jesus the final high-priest once and for all. And the pun in his name cannot be accidental — "My king is righteousness personified." In Jesus that righteousness personified was shared with sinners.

Doesn't this also shed light on your citation from Barry Bandsra, whose work I do not know. You cite him: "the Deuteronomistic historian framed the book with a theology of promise...On this promise, projected into the future again by the exiles who heard this story, Israel based its hope."

I would ask the question from the Letter to the Hebrews: which promise? The promise in the "faulty" covenant, or the better promise in the better covenant? The Hebrews writer gives a long citation from Jeremiah 31 of that "better" covenant. It doesn't just show up for the first time in Jesus. It's all the way back there to Abraham. Jesus fulfills it. But it's been there from the beginning of Israel's history. There is no land mentioned in Jeremiah 31 about the "new" covenant. It's clear to me that Israel's hope for land, which Bandsra highlights, even when you call it the "promised" land, is not based on the "better" promise of the "better" covenant. [I think that is true for the state of Israel today. But that's another topic.]

The "land" is an ambiguous component in OT covenant texts—in the Abraham story it isn't there in the first covenant offer (Gen. 12) , but is there in the second (Gen 15). Might that be an addendum? Even deuteronomic? Seems to me that the Letter to the Hebrews is specifically "anti-land" both in its reading of the OT and for sure in its proclamation of Christ's better promise/covenant. Isn't that exactly what Hebrews 11:13-16 is saying? Even for Abraham, the Hebrews writer claims, the land was irrelevant. The "home"-land for Abraham and all the "by faith-ers" celebrated in Hebrews 11 is NOT Canaanite geography. Ditto for present-day Christ-trusters who are now on that same pilgrim path. It's not a homeland to get back to, but a "land" where none of us has ever yet been. It's still up ahead for us and for Abraham too. "They desire a better country, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; indeed, he has prepared a city for them." It's still up ahead

for all of us Abrahamites.

God hidden, God revealed

After that long, long sortie, there is the hidden God, revealed God distinction, that Luther discovered in the Old Testament. The issue here in this distinction is not an “intellectual” problem (e.g., the genocide of the Canaanites, the infanticide of Psalm 137), but the personal problem of God not keeping his mercy/blessing promise to the promise-truster. Here God himself seems to be contradicting his own “better” promise. Primordial example of this for Luther was God’s command to Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, the very “child of [the better] promise.” What to do, asks Luther, when such a mega-onslaught comes to us in our own lives—Anfechtung he called it—attacks on our trust in God coming directly from God? Answer: do not try to “figure it out.” Do what Abraham did. Trust the “better” promise in the very face of God’s contradicting it himself. Abraham did just that. God did indeed keep his promise. For Abraham it was like resurrection, getting Isaac back from the dead. So says the Hebrews writer (11:19). That happened again with God’s own beloved Son. That Son verifies that his Promising Father will do likewise for all promise-trusters.

Here’s a Luther paragraph that popped up in our morning devotions a few days ago:

*God Hidden, God Revealed* The hidden Will of God should not be investigated but adored, with trembling, as a deep, holy secret of God’s High majesty, which He has reserved to Himself.

*Thus we must not search God’s nature and His hidden will. For therein we have nothing to do with Him, nor does He desire to have anything to do with us. God is at work in many ways which He does not reveal to us in His Word. Likewise He has many intentions which he has not revealed to us in His Word.*

*Therefore we should behold the Word and leave the unfathomable Will alone, for we have received no command about it.*

*For we must direct ourselves in accordance with His revealed Word and not with His unfathomable Will. It behoves us not to seek the high, great, holy secrets of the Majesty who dwells in light which no man can approach, as Paul says (I Timothy 6:1). We should cleave unto God who permits us to draw near to Him, and to Him who was made man, Jesus Christ the crucified (as St. Paul says), in whom are hidden all the treasures of God's wisdom. For in Him we have superabundantly received all things which we know and which it behoves us to know. [From "On the Enslaved Will"]*

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[And then this recent arrival about "Damn is not a Dirty Word."]

As an American who has lived and worked outside the US for 23 years now, I find the whole Jeremiah Wright incident both interesting and disturbing. From the beginning the US media (unfortunately the Canadian media have tagged along) has failed to understand the content or context of Pr. Wright's ministry and preaching. It is as if the media never heard of the Black church or never had any consciousness of its culture and history. I am truly saddened, though, that so many Americans allow their consciousness of Pr. Wright to be shaped by carefully edited sound bites on Fox News. Are Americans so totally ignorant of propaganda techniques that they do not recognize it when it bites them in the nose? Has anyone compared the sound bites to the full text of the sermons from which they are so skilfully extracted? Has anyone read the full text of Pr. Wright's interview with Bill Moyers?

Of all people Pr. Wright credits Martin Marty with making him

what he is today! He says his whole approach to ministry in South Chicago is based on what he learned from Marty at U of C Div. School. Take that, Lutherans!

Anyway, I wish that people would stop being such suckers for these media circuses. Jeremiah Wright is not who Fox News claims he is, and before we condemn him (not to mention the abomination of making psychological diagnoses from TV!) we should get the whole story. I'm no great fan of Obama (too conservative for me) and I am deeply disappointed that he caved in on his own pastor, but this was so obviously a ploy to divide people along racial lines that I would hope that intelligent, theologically astute people would refuse to participate. From outside the US the whole thing is really embarrassing.

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## **A Mixed Report Card on “Damn is Not a Dirty Word” and “Preaching from OT Texts”**

Colleagues,

A mixed report card came in for recent ThTh posts.

The “Damn is Not a Dirty Word” post (ThTh 517) received about an equal number of thumbs-up and thumbs-down. Though the thumbs-down were mostly focused on Jeremiah Wright as an unworthy

messenger (“evil man . . . narcissistic . . . psychopath . . . liar . . . racist”) and not on what I thought was THE THEME for the ThTh 517 offering. Namely, is the verdict accurate that God has ceased “blessing” America, and is now giving us up to “OK, America, THY will be done,” which is the meaning of the Biblical four-letter word “damn”?

Those hard words for Jeremiah Wright still sounded like “if you don’t like the message, kill the messenger” to my ears.

Someone asked my opinion on whether this nation deserved the “damn-diagnosis.” In responding to that one I punted. “Not my job. Judgment in world history, we confess, has been turned over to someone ‘who sits at God’s right hand from whence HE shall come to judge the earth.’” Besides, it’s not smart to usurp Jesus’ job. His assignment to us was to read the signs of the times—using the clues he gave for such reading—and live in faith in the face of those signs. Yes, and from the very first time he’s quoted as saying that, some have read the signs one way, some another way.

I did get carried away a tad in responding to the suggestion that Jeremiah Wright might be a “narcissist, almost a borderline personality in the strict sense of both words in the DSM.” [DSM = Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, the handbook for mental health professionals that lists different categories of mental disorders and the criteria for diagnosing them.]

That prompted this from yours truly: “And so was his OT namesake, and almost all the other OT prophets we now venerate as canonical. They’d all be in the DSM. Paul of Tarsus too—obsessive-compulsive if there ever was one. For narcissism Elijah is the OT superstar. Hebrew word that we translate as prophet (“nabi”) means exactly that, the OT pros tell me. A DSM

candidate.

Or maybe he's just a sinner, but so what? Was there ever a human God-messenger (except for Jesus) who was not? But that didn't last for long as he appropriated that sinner-label so native to us and appropriated it for himself.

Why does it make any difference that the Jeremiah whom God has sent to us might be weird, a DSM listee? Why should Freud triumph when it comes to listening to God's messengers? Theologians of the cross seldom ever passed the sanity tests of their age—or of the age's sages. Why should it be different now?

There's no Biblical precedent that I know of which instructs us: "Don't kill the messenger (unless he's a nut) if you don't like his message."

Didn't the Donatist heresy decision (Augustine the guru for the eventual verdict) settle this once and for all? The personal defects of the proclaimer (even his/her unfaith!) do not invalidate the proclamation. The proclamation is validated by its conformity to the Word of God. I think it applies *expressis verbis* to J. Wright.

As you can see, I'm opinionated on this one, maybe even "narcissist, possibly a borderline personality in the strict sense of both words in the DSM."

[Yes, I did get carried away.]

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Concerning ThTh 518: "Preaching from OT Texts," a communique for Armencius Munthe in Sumatra, Indonesia.

1. A number of you did hear a "Macedonian call" in the message from Armencius asking for diagnosis/prognosis



text-study assistance. The Crossings board of directors did too and they're working on it. Anybody out there in the club want to donate a plane ticket?

2. Right in the middle of that comes a similar message to <info@crossings.org> couple days ago from a pastor in South Africa. "You Crossings people are a real find for me, here in South Africa. I'm pastor of a Lutheran congregation . . . trying to find people doing law-promise theology. You 'guys' seem to know a lot about this, so I'd like to learn from you all I can. Will you help me, please? I work in a congregation of 130 members, made up of all the various races living in South Africa . . . . It is really exciting to be here, where integration is happening before my eyes, but how to proclaim the Gospel (sola gratia) here, while surrounded with 'Pelagians or semi-Pelagians' in a very pluralistic culture, is what this congregation is trying to figure out with my help (and now, hopefully, yours too). Have you any suggestions? Our resources are tiny, unemployment and crime are our main social problems, many are in a daily struggle just to survive. It's good to read your writings and I am sure glad that I have stumbled onto your website. Thanks for that! Greetings from the South!" Is that Macedonian again? Anybody want to donate another plane ticket?

3. Old man's musing. The serendipity of these South Africa and North Sumatra overtures made me think of Teilhard de Chardin, (1881-1950) and the word "noosphere" [no-uh-sphere] which he popularized. [Well, "popularized" may be saying too much, but noosphere is in my 1997 tenth edition Webster.] The noosphere, he proposed, is the next stage of cosmic evolution (after "geosphere," the inanimate world, and "biosphere," the life-saturated world). The noosphere is the "sphere of human thought" being derived from the Greek ("nous") meaning "mind" + ("sfaira") meaning

“sphere,” in the style of “atmosphere,” a “thought-sphere” encompassing the already life-saturated world. These near-instant exchanges between people in South Africa, North Sumatra and North America are probably not what Teilhard had in mind. I think he thought that noosphere-hardware/software would evolve within the human head, or heart—or somewhere on the inside. Yet had he lived into the internet age, he would surely have seen cyber-sphere as something close to “noosphere now.” Just in case you didn’t know it, Wikipedia says: “Teilhard is often called the patron saint of the Internet.”

But all of that is a digression from last week’s “Preaching from OT Texts.”

4. First reponse was this one. “Can you help me with the word ‘paranaesis’ in ThTh 518? I can’t find it in my NT Greek lexicon, nor in any of the systematic works available to me. What does it mean?”

To which I had to admit my mistake, so I told him:

No wonder. I misspelled it! Big booboo. And my super editor wife didn’t catch it either. What are your copy-editor rates?

Should have been “parainesis,” the noun drawn from the verb “paraineoo” (to advise, exhort). See Acts 27:9 & 22. [In Luke 3:18 it is a variant reading for the verb “parakaleoo” (to speak words of encouragement), from which come the nouns “paraklesis” (encouragement) and Paraclete (the encourager).] Hence as a noun “parainesis” signals “exhortation, counsel, advice, recommendation.” In short, all the promise-based ethical “urgings” that the NT is full of. What Elert calls “grace-imperatives”—very different from “law-imperatives.” I think I learned it in NT classes back in Germany ages ago. Maybe it’s not used

much in Anglo-Saxon Biblical scholarship.

Thanks a bunch. I'll have to "fess up" in the next number of ThTh.

5. Another response enjoyed the simplified explanation of our Crossings six-step procedure offered to Armencius. It was my retelling of Bob Bertram's original "Aha!" for hearing the diagnosis and prognosis within Biblical texts. So good, said this senior woman theologian, that "I've sent it on to all my kids." I happen to know there are six of those.
6. Then several pointed questions from someone who's new, he says, to Crossings stuff, but (mostly) likes what he's reading. However, there were items in my reading of the Old Testament where he found Biblical texts saying YES to where I said NO—and vice versa. I responded to each item he raised, and intended to send on to you that exchange to close out this Thursday's post. But I now notice that it's four pages long. So I'll save it, D.v., for next time. Stay tuned.

Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder

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## **Robert W. Bertram, "Time for Confessing"-When Faith Hits**

# the Road

Colleagues:

Richard H. Luecke reviews Bob Bertram's book for us this week. Sixty years ago he and Bob Bertram and Jaroslav Pelikan were teaching philosophy at Valparaiso University. That field was my undergraduate major in 1948-50. So they were my teachers. Up until that time I was a pre-med student. These three were at the center of my "conversion" to the seminary track. Had it not been for them, you would not be reading this.

At age 23 Luecke was the youngest of the troika. Pelikan was 25 and Bertram 27. All three were U of Chicago Ph.D. students, Pelikan already having gotten his sheepskin. All three were Missouri Synod preacher's kids, so they were kosher to be bringing egg-head philosophy into this "Missouri" university. Youngsters though they were, they were major players in then president O.P. Kretzmann's mad dream to "link Athens and Jerusalem" at Valpo. As we students soon learned, these three guys knew BOTH cities—inside out. There weren't multitudes who majored in philosophy, but we who did knew that—in all humility—we were where the action was.

Dick Luecke and Bob Bertram were buddies and co-conspirators from way back—as you'll hear in this review. After those early years teaching at Valpo Dick succeeded his father as parish pastor in Norwood Park, Illinois. Then campus pastor in Princeton NJ. Then back to his native Chicago to be director of studies at the Urban Training Center in 1964—a think-tank with hands-on praxis for Christian ministry in the urban scene. In the decades since then—with guest teaching stints here and abroad—Dick is still leading folks along "the Way" of Christ in the city. Past books of his are:

*"New Meanings for New Beings,"*

*"Violent Sleep: Notes Toward the Development of Sermons for the Modern City,"*

*"Perchings: Reflections on Society and Ministry."*

All available at Amazon.com.

Currently in the hopper is another one on the city, this time toying with a famous malapropism of Chicago Mayor Richard J. Daley: "Sodom and Glockamora."

I learned about St. Augustine—and his famous bon mot "tolle lege"—from Richard Luecke. For what Richard has to say about Bob, the same is good counsel: take and read.

Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder

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A best of all possible Forewords by Edward Schroeder begins by saying that Robert Bertram "is perhaps the most unpublished major Lutheran theologian of the twentieth century." He suggests this resulted from Bertram's "perfectionism." There was that. We all noted and sometimes lamented a lifelong reluctance on Bob's part to let things he composed go out of his hands. Now, with this new book safely in our own hands, we are moved to say something more about why this was so.

A student tribute is cited that mentions the Socratic method. Every student knows that we have not a single written word from Socrates. When, in youthful days, we were doing philosophy with Bob Bertram and undergraduates, we shared passages like this one in the Phaedrus dialog.

"Soc: Writing [graphee, in the original Greek], you know,

Phaedrus, has this strange quality about it, which makes it really like painting [zoographia]: the painter's products stand before us quite as though they were alive; but if you question them, they maintain a solemn silence. So, too, with written words: you might think they spoke as though they made sense, but if you ask them anything about what they are saying, if you wish an explanation, they go on telling you the same thing, over and over forever. Once a thing is put in writing, it rolls about all over the place, falling into the hands of those who have no concern with it just as easily as under the notice of those who comprehend it; it has no notion of whom to address or whom to avoid. And when it is ill-treated or abused as illegitimate, it always needs its father to help it, being quite unable to protect or help itself." (275 D-E)

We are all grateful and relieved that teachings we drank from father Bertram are at last available in print. We are thankful at the same time that its specially attuned Foreword writer, its devoted editor, and the face-to-face Crossings Community who went on enjoying those teachings at first hand are here to protect them. Bertram would insist on this. Plato wrote only dialogues, real ones with no "last words." He said why in Epistle VII.

"For this reason no serious man [or woman] will ever think of writing about serious realities for the general public so as to make them a prey to envy and perplexity... When anyone sees anywhere the written work of anyone ... the subject cannot have been his most serious concern... Serious interests have their abode somewhere in the noblest region of the field of his activity. If, however, he really was seriously concerned with these matters and put them in writing, 'then surely' [paraphrasing Homer] not the gods but mortals 'have utterly blasted his wits.'" (344 C-D)

There are way too many "seriouses" in that translation, but we understand this concern. Schroeder notes how 100+ papers in Bertram's computer were prepared for live consultations, assemblies, and disquisitions. (They are listed in Michael Hoy's bibliography and on the Crossings website.) Happily, these still wear the marks of that "viva vox." But no one present in a St. Louis ceremony honoring Bob will ever forget how he referred to himself as a teacher of people who were out there actually DOING it. Those "living letters," as he called them, will know how to consult and enjoy these papers now that they are out-of-the-box. They will also know how the lack until now of any available publication was of a piece with their central theme: "Confession." Many other modern utterances are also best taken as "oral, particular, local, and timely" (Stephen Toulmin's phrase in COSMOPOLIS 1990:186-192). But "confession" is a special case of this, as is signaled by the title A TIME FOR CONFESSING. "Time" and "confessing" are partly redundant. They go together.

This title MIGHT be taken by dear but self-engrossed or wit-blasted worldlings to mean we have a lot of sins to confess at this time. That is no doubt true, but this more private meaning prompted Garry Wills to rescue Augustine's CONFESSIONS by calling them "The Testimony." Augustine is sometimes said to have contributed to a privatized conscience in the West. So is Luther. Both may in fact have had such an effect; somebody did. But both also contributed to a more positive and public sense of confession, one that both speaks and demonstrates, that safeguards the one thing needful while relying at the same time on its truth and power. Bertram, too, focused not on "grace alone" or on lonely grace, but on the "sine qua non" of faith with its redirected hands and voices. "Confession" in this sense is where faith hits the road. Christians, no less than modern philosophers, can speak of "cash value" in what they say -though

this is not to be confused with any “gospel of prosperity.”

It is scary to think that Bob Bertram is no longer with us to clarify and help form this more positive, constructive, and open “confessing.” A very large continuing task remains with the Crossings Community.

Along my own less focused and less tutored way, I learned two New Testament words for “confess.” “Martyria” meant “witness,” which Bertram makes real by describing the Augsburg confessors as on a witness stand facing threatened reprisals. They sought recognition or at least restraint from imperial and churchly prosecutors for their practice of the Gospel-though why this should put them in the dock, even put goods, fame, child, and wife at risk, seemed a miscarriage or misuse of authority. The Seminex protagonists learned for themselves how confession in self-defense can be viewed as subversive, and how more than verbal consequences can ensue. This brought them to use not only their tongues and pens but their shoe leather. After one of his many forays explaining Seminex to established assemblies of “the firm,” I recall asking Bob whether he had brought back any scalps. He said he was lucky to come back with his own.

Not the least discovery awaiting perfunctory readers of the Lutheran confessions is a revelation in this new book concerning the Formula of Concord, Article X. We always thought of “adiaphora” as things you could have or not have, you could do or not do, which scarcely seemed matters for confession at all. Here we learn that FC X was a much more telling article about worldly authorities, who by enforcing “add-ons” to the gospel may actually subvert it, leaving adherents subject to complacency or despair. Such worldly authorities include both civil magistrates and church administrators, whose provisions and rulings may be very, very important but are never all-important. Add-ons from either of these sides can compromise the



gospel, the one and only thing that is in no sense an adiaphoron but the gift and mandate of the Church's Head. On the 400th anniversary of the Formula of Concord, Bertram came from the Seminex experience to deliver an utterly surprising, eye-opening, and liberating address on FC X about the sufficiency, the "satus est," of the gospel-and-sacraments. Dietrich Bonhoeffer had done the same thing from an underground seminary at Finkenwalde.

My other word was "homologia," which means "saying the same thing." What is said in a time for confessing is always presented as a common confession, even if it is uttered by an isolated protagonist. Bertram cites Martin King's "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," which called on confessors throughout the land to affirm the Black churches in their way of nonviolence with worldly powers-some of them churchly-who were enforcing legal restraints and exclusions that compromised the gospel by (in a word) confining God's image-bearing children to "nobodiness." Similarly, resistance to apartheid in South Africa confronted Christian councils in many other lands with their need to say a right word in unison, and perhaps perform a right deed of disinvestment.

Seminex did not move out without appealing to the churches to come along. Richard Caemmerer reminded Seminex marchers how "exile" in the Bible, beginning with Abraham, entailed more than standing alone or waiting to go back where you came from. It meant looking and moving forward together toward a City that is to come. Even the Babylonian exile proved creative and productive in many ways-also for the Bible itself. Important texts came together there. As in a familiar folk story of the young Martin Luther, people found the Bible and its singular Good News unchained by the "here we stand" and the "going out" of Seminex.

Bertram exposes characteristics of confession beyond my two of witness and solidarity. The Barmen Declaration, issued by reformed and Lutheran parties during the Third Reich of Hitler's Germany, did more than to resist unacceptable add-ons to the gospel imposed by leaders of both church and state. It reset those authorities. Bertram's key to doing this was, predictably, "law and gos pel." His grandfather and father had translated, respectively, C.F.W. Walther's PROPER DISTINCTION BETWEEN LAW AND GOSPEL and the dogmatics of Werner Elert, a theologian at the university of Erlangen. Elert seems a mentoring presence throughout this book. He took historic issue on law-gospel grounds not only with Nazi-conforming "German Christians," but also with "ecclesiastical theocrats" who affirmed gospel in such a way as to omit respect for secular powers and authorities as such. The law-gospel distinction affirms BOTH the gracious reign of God in the gospel AND an indispensable restraining (perhaps also achieving) reign of God through law. These are not "separate spheres." This is a distinction without separation. Remember Bonhoeffer's perduring commitment not only to the church but to the German people. Remember his famous letter from prison asking us to live not only in a confessing church but in a world come of age.

Sometimes, in salad days with Bertram, we speculated about the "noble pagans." We asked whether the "virtues" and the "honestum" they practiced could be of any interest to Christians who say "by grace alone." Detailed treatment of those human habits, as well as admirable exemplars, were to be found in worldly exponents. Aristotle's fifty pages on the virtue of "friendship" and Cicero's treatise on that topic appeared eminently educative. We recognized, to be sure, that those virtues were "still under the law"-perhaps the rule about acting in accordance with a mean between extremes. We noted the restrictions pagans themselves professed. Aristotle said, on the

basis of his own description, that no one could have MANY friends. Neither "charity" nor "humility" ever made any of the classic lists. These qualities CAN become dangerous or sticky (pace Nietzsche). Do-gooder sympathy is regarded in some Chicago neighborhoods as "welfare colonialism." When New Testament epistles came in the end to commend such qualities, they did so with a view to the Redeemer and the gift of the Spirit. These were fostered along with the best gifts of faith, hope, and love. Noble pagans, exactly because they were noble, did not count suffering all joy. That came to healthy acceptance only in the company of one who rejoiced in travail because a new kind of human was being born into the world.

Confession on the German scene during World War II confirmed distinctive ethical responses. Beginning with THE COST OF DISCIPLESHIP, but continuing in his much interrupted ETHICS, Bonhoeffer distinguished between Gospel "formation" and the "conformity" for which Germans are famous. An official add-on was now requiring exclusion of non-Aryans from worship-which could no more be accepted than pinching incense to an emperor. Bonhoeffer wrote about "taking on guilt" in performance of an AVOIDABLE deed. "The structure of responsible action involves both willingness to become guilty [Bereitschaft zur Schuldübernahme] and freedom" (ETHICS 1955:54ff.). In fact, such acceptance of guilt and freedom implied each other. This choice could become inescapable for any responsible person. Bonhoeffer's participation in an assassination plot, after attempts to recruit the churches for speaking truth to Adolf Hitler, is sometimes cited as a precedent for the just war theory. Bonhoeffer preferred not to speak of this unique act either as a "precedent" or as a "theory" or as "just."

Bertram traces his sensitivity to these various "times for confessing" to the Seminex experience itself-without which we might have none of this from him. Coming to Seminex's own

confession, Bob sets down yet another common characteristic: "ambiguous certitude." "We didn't always know what we were doing" (Schroeder, p. xii). Risk is entailed in confessional moments and movements. This does not lead to quietistic withdrawal, however, without incurring an even greater risk. Sitting-out this opportunity can amount to a deterioration, even denial. Always to be remembered is the greatest of all risks taken and repeatedly taught by Jesus in the Gospels.

The question with which we look up from this book (though not for long) is the one with which it began: When is it "a time for confessing"? Schroeder cites Bertram's FC X lecture: these are "crunch moments in church history, not just everyday occasions for Christian witness" (p. xi). Valid confession takes place when, but only when, the one gospel-and-sacraments are at stake. All other questions are matters for political argument, perhaps church politics. Yet the question "When is the church a confessional movement?" needs to be asked afresh nowadays, Bertram says, "if only because of the dilemmas [modern] movements are posing" (p. 132).

Civil Rights, apartheid, and poverty are all obvious matters of public responsibility. Bob agrees, yet he interprets King's "Letter" as a "martyria" insisting on Gospel freedom and responsibility. He finds confession in the very middle of this very public contention; he sees it as needed to disencumber the gospel. He even compares the opposition in Birmingham to the circumcision party in Galatia, who so insisted on an adiaphoron that it amounted to "another gospel."

After a rigged election in the Philippines of 1986, unarmed men and women carried crucifixes to the streets between the drawn up tanks of Marcos loyalists and defectors who supported Corazon Aquino, the rightful winner. In the middle of this worldly contention, Bertram sees the poor of the Lord claiming a proper

people power with "a vulnerability born of faith." The demonstration had been nurtured by Basic Christian Communities after Vatican II, which called for standing and moving with the oppressed. This was "protest" in the traditional sense of "confession." Here the poor were not mere objects of charitable concern but agents of the future. Their action placed great store in faith-faith that was not only IN something but ABOUT something. The result was remembered as "the miracle of EDSA" (Epifanio de los Santos Avenue).

Some readers are sure to ask whether such faithful expressions within modern controversial movements actually rise to confessional status. How many confessions can be received by the churches? Seminex, we are told, treated systematic theology as "Christian Confession: Classical" and "Christian Confession: Contemporary"-this suggests a continuing receptivity and task of clarification. The question we wish to ask is what FORM our response should take to events and testimony bearing the marks of confession. King's letter, the South African appeal, and the Epiphany on the Avenue of the Saints were all crunches calling out for wider affirmation. Did they also entail, along with assent, something with respect to our own complicity in the fruits of unpaid labor and the growing plight of the poor?

Slavery in America enriched both North and South in ways exceeding the profits of railroads and stock exchanges. Stock holders and their families still gain from corporations in South Africa and the Philippines. Is some follow-up required on our own scene with respect to the lingering-in fact growing-income disparities in working America (no longer 4:1 but 400:1), at a time when one-fifth of the world's population have lost the ground beneath their feet and try to survive on less than two dollars a day? It seems no great step from this to criminalization of drugs, three-strike sentencing, bursting prisons, capital executions, and weaponry in the U.S. that now

surpass all precedents and tend to keep things exactly the way they are. Entire towns depend on the prison industry-some not far from St. Louis.

A long Appendix to the Bertram book announces itself with a revealing pun (like those ever-present in Crossings literature): "Postmodernity's CRUX." (Get it?) A primary biblical text is 2 Corinthians 2-7, to which Bertram brought a lifetime of reflection, including 15 years honing a dissertation at the University of Chicago on "the grammar of theological predication." There Bob confronted a charge by Karl Barth that Luther had shifted theological interest from God who is "wholly other" to "what God is for humans" -and stayed with Luther. The Holy Trinity provided warrant for this. These last sections of Bob's book actually bear the marks of an intended publication. Even so, they are presented in the form of theses which (like Luther's) issue challenges and invite discourse.

In the "R" section of CRUX (acronyms are a Crossings device), Bertram confronts what he calls the "revelationist fallacy" in modern churches and perhaps in us. We treat Christ as a "revealer" rather than "redeemer." This makes for "cheap grace." It "trivializes not only divine wrath but Christ as well," and "disemploys the Holying Spirit" (p.166). In the Corinthian letter Jesus Christ is said to have done more than to "SHOW God's love"-more even than to bear the world's rejection as a way of staying with it, in hopes of changing human minds. Something happened with God in Christ. The "theological predication" at issue, as Schroeder neatly summarizes it, is "how our sins (rightly predicated to us) become rightly predicated to Christ, and how Christ's righteousness (rightly predicated to him) rightly becomes predicated to us" (p. ix). Such a transaction puzzles and offends many contemporaries. A much published modern churchman speaks of "child abuse."

Bertram speaks, rather, of recovering an all but forgotten “fear of God.” He will not let us skip over divine wrath and judgment for something divinely pleasant. While he does not explicitly say so, would this “wrath” not include white hot vehemence for dispossession and neglect of the Lord’s poor, exclusion of the stranger, assigning “nobodiness” to race and gender? Jesus’ story of the judgment focused plainly and simply on action with the poor, hungry, thirsty, naked, sick, and imprisoned-all very present in newly qualified circumstances.

Who shall stand? Bob remembers how Moses, having glimpsed the glory of God on the Mount of the Law, thereafter wore a veil to shield that “glowry” from humans who could not see it and live-yet for whom it was really there. The “happy exchange” (Luther’s phrase for the predications, rephrased as “sweet swap” by Bertram) is not only made “happier” by this glory; it is made awesome and efficient. The result is not mere “grace alone” but a responsive faith that confronts blasphemous rulers, challenges complacent citizens, maintains solidarity with the poor, and keeps administrators in their proper place-that of facilitating us all.

Was this not exactly the point of the New Testament Letter of James- that “faith alone” is never in fact alone? Was calling this a “straw epistle” a lapse on Luther’s part, and a very consequential one? Do current apologists tend to neglect some dear warts? Luther’s counsels during the peasants’ revolt are ascribed to “restraint of violence.” Have we read his unrestrained words? Or considered the wars of religion that followed? The 16th century Luther relied, to be sure, on divine preservation of order through the rule of princes. What about the public responsibility of citizens since, say, the 18th century? Does this account for the many new dilemmas modern movements are posing?

Crossings is immediate heir to Seminex with its concentration on confession. It was formed, after earnest discussion and repeated votes, by participants who resisted the blandishments of deployment to (and absorption by) mainline seminaries-depicted as flesh pots, career building, and rest after burnout. Those who deployed, we are pleased to hear, still enjoy the singing. On publication of this new book, we save our cheers for the Crossings Community. Here people begin by tracking their own personal and social text in daily callings, including that of citizenship. They introduce a current biblical text, finding its lively import on both sides of law-gospel. They do not stop until that text becomes flesh in the CRUX of the matter, and their own flesh becomes text in timely and costly confession.

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## **Book Review on Lutherans in Hitler's Germany**

Colleagues,

This past semester I was asked to sit in for one session on a graduate seminar at St. Louis University where the topic was: The Church's Response—both Catholic and Protestant—to Hitler. The professor, Mark Ruff, is a rising star in that era of European history. We're both ELCA Lutherans—yes, even both with LCMS roots.

When the seminar got around to examining some of the German Lutherans who were my professors back in the 1950s (and Mark knew that) he asked me to join in the discussion. The assignment for that session was to discuss Matthew D. Hockenos's recent



book A CHURCH DIVIDED. GERMAN PROTESTANTS CONFRONT THE NAZI PAST. Bloomington IN: Indiana UP. 2004.

For my part I presented a book review. Here it is.

Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder

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**Matthew D. Hockenos.**

**A CHURCH DIVIDED. GERMAN PROTESTANTS CONFRONT THE NAZI PAST.**

**Bloomington IN: Indiana UP. 2004. [US\$30 at Amazon]**

Matthew Hockenos is Associate Professor of History (Modern Europe, Germany) at Skidmore College in Saratoga Springs NY. His book is the story of good guys vs. bad guys in 1945-50 in Germany, the first five years following World War II. He chronicles the differing ways the good guys and bad guys—"German Protestants" all of them—"confronted the[ir] Nazi past." Let the reader be warned: my teachers wind up among the bad guys. So you may not wish to read any further.

The bad guys are the Lutherans, regularly given the adjectives "conservative" or "orthodox," and for the badest of the bad "ultra-conservative."

The good guys are Karl Barth [not really a German at all, but a Swiss citizen] and the German theologians/pastors for whom he was guru. Their identifiers are the words "Barmen" and "Dahlemites," sometimes "radical," most often "the reformers."

We are never told why "conservative, orthodox, ultraconservative" are dirty words. Nor are we told why Barth and the boys are "better." That's just the way it is.

Except for this one reason, I guess. The good guys (though not perfect—and we are told of their defects) most often did what the author finds good [and here “good” = morally right, yes even “Christian-ly” right], whilst the Lutheran crowd didn’t.

And the main (only?) yardstick for what was “right” was that the good guys did “speak out” against Hitler, whilst the bad guys didn’t. What all the bad guys may also have done that didn’t get into the media is never told us. They are bad guys because they didn’t speak out. Never are we shown that the strategy of “speak out” had palpable success in stopping anything Hitler was doing. Nor that the possible “not speak out” of the bad guys whilst working “camouflaged” or “just” in the faithful execution of their callings, whether that achieved anything positive. I do have data to document that—by one of the allegedly baddest of the bad guys, Werner Elert.

The author’s posture as a moralist —and the arbitrary yardstick he uses for measuring right/wrong—was for this reader gosh-awful throughout the book.

We are told that behind those negative adjectives for the Lutherans are the fundamentals of their Lutheran theology—drawn straight from the Lutheran Confessions of the 16th century. Over and over again the author gives us the laundry list of the bad stuff. Summarized in this sentence at the end of the book: Even “after the war, many conservative Lutherans continued to subscribe to the orthodox interpretations of the doctrine of two kingdoms, law-gospel dualism, divine orders, and the theory of supersessionism.” 175

The author doesn’t discuss whether or not these no-no’s are at the heart of the Lutheran reformation—as they indeed are—and that if the bad guys were indeed to follow his counsel and “move” to be the good guys, they would cease to be Lutherans.

Perhaps that is his message.

So his deeper historical claim is: Calvin (Barth's hero) was right, Luther was wrong. But to argue THAT thesis you can't confine your essay to five years of 20th century German history.

I'm told that Hockenos is a Roman Catholic. If so, that alone still doesn't say much given the broad spectrum of theologies within the Roman communion today. It too is replete with good guys and bad guys—and I get these evaluations from RC folks themselves. Especially at St. Louis University, a Jesuit school! Yet from having been around the theology marketplace for a few years, and entangled in ecumenical conversation for half a century, I can “divine” why Barth's fundamental theological blueprint and the standard “nature-grace” graph-paper of classical Roman theology are sympatico for Hockenos. And I do know that nature/grace Roman theologians regularly twitch when they confront Luther's duplex/paradox proposals (in that laundry list above) for getting to the cornerstone of the Christian faith.

Hockenos would be helped if someone told him that THE issue at the center of the 16th century Reformation was hermeneutics. HOW to read the Bible, and from that kind of Bible-reading, HOW to read the world. Luther himself says that his AHA! —the eye-opener that moved him away from his RC theology—was just that, namely, his finding the “discrimen” between God's law and God's Gospel RIGHT in the Bible itself. After years of teaching Bible at Wittenberg, the penny dropped. Here's the macaronic last line of Tischreden 5518: “Do ich das discrimen fande, quod aliud esset lex, aliud euangelium, da riß ich her durch.” [WA. Tischreden V p. 210, #5518.] “When I found the distinction, that the law is one thing, and the gospel something else, that was my breakthrough.”

That difference in hermeneutical Aha! is also at the center of the difference between Luther and Calvin. And that's the continuing cornerstone difference between the good guys and bad guys that Hockenos presents.

But here too it is lousy history simply to affirm (and give no adequate warrants): Calvin and the boys are right, Luther and the boys are wrong.

WHY is the Lutheran hermeneutic [two kingdoms, law-gospel dualism, divine orders] wrong? The only proof that Hockenos cites is that the Lutherans (obviously operating on their Lutheran hermeneutic for reading the Bible and for reading their world, yes their Hitler-world) did and said things that Hockenos finds reprehensible. So it is a moral argument—using his chosen moral yardstick—that he invokes over and over again for why Lutheran theology is bad. What kind of historiography is that?

To my utter amazement my name appears in two bibliographic references of this book! So he might have interviewed me! Of course, that's silly, but if he had talked to me he'd have heard some things that might have been helpful.

1. First of all, what those reprehensible “two kingdoms, law-gospel dualism, divine orders” are all about. My conviction from going through the book is: he hasn't a clue.
2. The plausibility of Bishop Wurm's and Professor Thielicke's critique of Allied occupation policy and action right after 1945.
3. The absolute madness of the de-nazification program. In Christian terms = “convincing” unbelievers (in democracy) to convert to democracy, just because you've beat the hell out of them. All this when your alleged moral superiority is at best a mixed bag—especially when viewed in the long

stretches of European history. The parallel, in my judgment, is Maoist “camps” to re-educate incipient democrats into the “right” ideology. Or even the example which Hockenos details in his last full chapter as clear folly: German pastors seeking to move surviving Jews to become Christ-confessors. If that is madness, why isn’t de-nazification insane?

4. The reality of the genocide against any and all Germans carried out by the Russians and the Poles in former German areas of eastern Europe.
5. What the Barth vs. Lutherans stand-off in the first half of the 20th cent. was all about. ‘Twas my doctoral dissertation—with Thielicke as my Doktorvater.
6. Some insight into Thielicke—also into that Stuttgart Good Friday sermon that Hockenos critiques. Which makes Hockenos’ treatment—a moralist’s rejection—sound sophomoric.

Vexing to this reader is the “(b)ad hominem” labels over and over again about the bad guys. Sometimes signalling that the author was almost inside the head/heart/gut of the bad guys to read their entrails.

- a. they were “vague, they shied away.”
- b. one piece of their prose is “riddled with unwieldly Biblical aphorisms”
- c. they “contrived” their own self-justification
- d. Bishop Wurm “equivocates.”
- e. they “embellish”
- f. Bishop Meiser “conceals.”
- g. make a “watered-down confession.” After a string of such ad hominem, the author says, “therefore one can only conclude....” To draw conclusions from ad hominem arguments is an abomination both in logic and in history-writing. So it seems to me

- h. "wisdom was not forthcoming" from these leaders.
- i. "deliberately employed religious rhetoric to blur their failings."
- j. "attempted to manipulate the discourse" by resorting to "Lutheran doctrine," and thus "shied away" from being specific.
- k. Pastor Assmussen "tried to spin Wurm's letter."
- l. Wurm's "desire to elevate his own stature . . . (his) distasteful prejudices . . . rewriting history . . . misrepresenting the facts . . . desire to gain popularity."

I'll stop here. This sampling is from but 1/3 of the book.

**Summa:** If this had been Hockenos's dissertation and I had been his reader I would have returned it for serious reworking.

1. Although he has indeed read everything and accumulated great data. he's clueless about the core of Lutheran theology which he finds defective. How can you write a dissertation on that topic and get away with being clueless?
2. Granted, even after he did get more clarity here, I could guess that he'd still say no to the better-understood theology of the bad guys.
3. One place, btw, where his RC heritage (if that's what he is) shimmers through, I think, is his mis-reading on what "Guilt" is when one reads the Bible (and the guilty world) with a Luth. hermeneutical lens. When the post-WWII German Lutherans keep on insisting that guilt is a "coram deo" reality, my interface with God, that needs fixing FIRST, before any other guilt-fixing is possible, Hockenos regularly says: "Yes, of course, guilt before God is not unimportant—but what about your guilt, you bad guys, your guilt 'coram hominibus,' your interface with humankind? . THAT's where it's at in the Nazi era. And with your

‘unwieldly Biblical aphorisms’ YOU make that sound so secondary. Shame on you.” “Precisely,” say the Lutherans, “and we can show you why those ‘Biblical aphorisms’ constrain us to do just that.” But Hockenos doesn’t understand that.

4. And those ad hominems! How did the Indiana University Press editors let him get away with that?

**Summa:** To write history as bad guys vs. good guys is the way Hitler himself wrote history. Better said, “re-wrote” history. As do most all “winners” after the conflict. And so do all Manichaeans write history. [Our President Bush has been doing that from the bully pulpit for lo, these last 8 years. It’s been our national tradition from the git-go. Most American citizens today do likewise. So in that regard, Bush is indeed OUR president.] But that’s not writing history. It’s ideology. Even worse, propaganda. Worse still, fiction. If the bad guys were treated without ad hominem put-downs, if their Lutheran commitments were understood and given a fair shake, Hockenos’ book would be much better history.

Them’s my sentiments.

P.S. Oh, yes, besides my Doktorvater Helmut Thielicke, I did encounter “live” the following major players in Hockenos’s study: Karl Barth and Karl Ja spers, Werner Elert, Paul Althaus, Hans Lilje, and Martin Niemoeller.