

# **William P. Young. THE SHACK A Book Review by Phil Kuehnert, Pastor, Zion Lutheran Church, Fairbanks, Alaska**

It was February a year ago that Bob Sugden irrupted in our Fairbanks Text Study. For almost 25 years now, a group of deacons, pastors and priests have met on Wednesday mornings at 9:00 AM to study the texts for the rising Sunday. It is an eclectic group – but for the most part leaning toward the left side of the American religious community. I say religious, because in my more grumpy moods I claim to be one of the few in the group that still believes in Jesus! Occasionally over the years, clergy from the more conservative side come, take a look, speak, then go silent and finally slip away. The exception has been Bob Sugden, a retired military guy in his late 40's, who is the preacher at Two Rivers Church of the Nazarene.

Two Rivers is one of several old hippie communities that surround Fairbanks, its inhabitants being the quintessential APP (Alaskan Personality Profile): “leave me alone and I will do it my way, but by the way I want a triple share of my government entitlements.” Bob has been in the community for four years and has done wonders to tend, mend and grow the wounded and fragmented community that Two Rivers Church of The Nazarene was. Bob also attends the fundamentalist clergy prayer warrior group that meets at 10:30 on Wednesday morning. A year ago he shared with us that God had laid on his heart to be the bridge between these two disparate expressions of the Body of Christ in Fairbanks.

The irruption on that cold and bleary February morning caught my

attention. Bob said, his cherry cheeks blazing with his squeaky Santa Claus voice strained in urgency, "Have you heard about The Shack?" Nobody had. He proceeded with a five minute synopsis of a book that left me spellbound. His normal hesitant speech was now a flow of eloquence and symmetry describing a riveting story line with mind-boggling theological implications. That evening I went to Barnes and Noble and was surprised to find a large supply of the book. That week I read it, finding it dealt with a topic that I have spent the last 25 years exploring, both as a pastor and as a pastoral counselor – the topic of theodicy. [Webster: "theodicy" = defense of God's goodness and omnipotence in view of the existence of evil.] My intuitive instinct was that it would become a breakout bestseller like other religious books that have had huge crossover acceptance. Here I was thinking about Scott Peck's THE ROAD LESS TRAVELLED, Rabbi Kushner's WHY BAD THINGS HAPPEN TO GOOD PEOPLE, the LEFT BEHIND series, Wilkerson's THE PRAYER OF JABEZ, and most recently, Rick Warren's THE PURPOSE-DRIVEN LIFE. My instinct has been proven right.

I did not read it critically from a theological standpoint – I read it as the younger brother to Paula Hope, my sister who was stillborn in 1942, after "a perfectly normal pregnancy." I was the child born to my parents 2 1/2 years later, alive! My father often told the story of her birth/death at St. Joseph's Hospital in St. Charles, Missouri. The same hospital I was born in. The Catholic "Sister," Dad recalled, came and asked him to baptize his daughter. He at first refused, saying that Lutherans don't baptize the dead. At her insistence that there were still living cells in the body, he baptized Paula Hope. About 15 years ago, shortly before Dad passed, he shared with me that Dr. Schulz, our family doctor, an alcoholic, was drunk that night and was not able to come to the hospital. The nurse on duty was inexperienced.

I read THE SHACK as the brother-in-law to Jeani, my wife's sister, who almost five years ago was beaten to death by her husband, my brother-in-law Jim, beaten to death with a baseball bat.

I read it as the pastor of Craig, husband to Gloria and father of four daughters including toddler Beatrice. Craig comes to church with his three surviving daughters. Weeping through most of the service, he admits he struggles in his believing in God. Almost three years ago he was piloting a high-powered jet boat on a family outing up the winding Cheena River less than a mile from where I live. Distracted for a moment, he ran the boat up on the steep bank and overturned it, trapping his wife and his 2 year old daughter Beatrice. A fireman by profession and EMT by training, he was helpless to rescue his wife and daughter. They drowned.

My personal and pastoral stories are not unique. These stories are us. From the Foreword of the book, written by Willie who introduces us to his friend Mack, the reader knows that this will be a story of a powerful encounter with God. Mack, brutalized by his godly father as a child, is the father of four children, the youngest of which, three-year-old Missy, is abducted from a family camping trip. She disappears and becomes the victim of a serial rapist. The remaining part of the book has Mack returning to the shack where Missy was murdered and there, in a transformative state, he encounters the Trinity. The encounter is where Mack has his conversation with God, the three persons!

For those of you not familiar with the book or the firestorm of criticism that it has stirred, you need to know a couple of facts. I was shocked early in July when I saw that THE SHACK was No. 1 on the NY Times Trade Paperback Best Seller List. By the end of July it had sold 1.2 million copies. In the religious

fiction market, if a title sells more than 10,000 it is considered a bestseller. By the end of September, more than 2 million had been sold. When I checked its current listing the last week of September on the Amazon.Com selling list, it was No. 4. However this was telling. The No. one book had 70 some reviews, the No. 2 had 9 reviews, the No. 3 had some 20 odd reviews, The Shack at No 4. had over 1500 reviews submitted. When I checked in January, it was No. 1 with 1606 reviews submitted. The author, William P. Young, was interviewed on the Today Show, and recently I heard it had already sold 6,000,000 copies.

Much of the criticism of the book has been misdirected, holding the book to standards of theological purity or ecclesiastical correctness that it never espoused to. I am not here to discuss the theological merits of the book; I present the book as an example of what I think is happening with God and Pastoral Care. [EHS: Note the capital P and capital C. Later Phil will distinguish this kind of Pastoral Care from lower-case "p" and "c" brands of "pastoral care."] People from the beginning have wrestled with God. Now the wrestling is more desperate. Pastoral Care is the business I am in. Pastoral Care is waiting on the side outside the ropes until I am "tagged" and it is my turn to have a go at it. Whether in my preaching, teaching or shepherding the congregation or wearing my administrative hat, I am in the business of Pastoral Care. My parishioners are going to find it wherever they can. While that is fine with me, I have the responsibility to know what they are reading and be able to assess the relative strengths and risks of what they are listening to, watching or reading. 20 years ago it was Rabbi Kushner's book. How pathetic!

Yet, the Rabbi's personal story and his compelling interpretation of the book of Job provided an answer, though inadequate, for their "cry." Again and again, WHY BAD THINGS

HAPPEN TO GOOD PEOPLE provided me the opportunity to talk about the Cross and the hope that we have that the good Rabbi doesn't have a clue about. Then came the LEFT BEHIND series. Again, those books have provided the opportunity to lay out in simple terms the Biblical basis for our belief about the second coming. And now it is THE SHACK. With THE SHACK, as with the other titles, I want to make sure that pastoral care—lower-case “p” and “c”—becomes Pastoral Care with caps. Pastoral Care with caps is distinguished from lower-case pastoral care by the presence of Christ's Cross in the former and its absence in the latter.

In the Crossings matrix, lower-case pastoral care attends to D1, D2 and P2 and P3. It does surface diagnosis (D1) and yes, even diagnoses deeper inside stuff (D2), but never touches the genuine God-problem (D3) at the root of the trauma. So also with its therapy—P2 and P3 in Crossings parlance—pastoral care (with no caps) addresses these levels of pain but does not offer healing at the root. Pastoral Care (with caps) pushes to the root diagnostic level (D3) where people talk and wrestle with God, and then speaks Christ (P1) to the agonized sufferer. Pun intended, the crucified and risen Christ is the crux of the context for Pastoral Care.

I write this on a flight from Houston to Panama. The woman across the aisle is reading THE SHACK. She, a Lutheran (!), like my wife, has had a hard time finishing it, because of its “dark nature.” When she found out that I knew about the book, we immediately had a point of connection. My wife finished it only after hearing author William P. Young in person. She was taken with his straightforward presentation and the transparent nature of what he hopes the book will accomplish.

I will continue to encourage my parishioners to read the book, especially those who ask me about it. Now more are coming to me with concerns about whether they should read it because of some

of the negative things they have heard about it. I encourage them to read it because if they have had any life situation that has given rise to the "Cry." they have had in some small part, or maybe in large part participated in the conversations that go on between Mack and the mythical persons who represent the Trinity. Mack gives expression to the questions and the anger and the frustration and the helplessness and even the hopelessness when faced with the tearing of the fabric of one's life. And for those who are still in the wilderness, as Fred Niedner reminds us, the place of "no words," Mack will provide words for them. And the triad of persons he encounters in the Shack play their parts well in listening, mirroring, cajoling, teasing, and crying and laughing with him.

Sure, I wish I could distill a more orthodox version of the Trinity from the book. Absolutely, I wish that the worshipping community would play a more important part in Mack's life. Of course, theological education is not a waste and seminaries are not out of touch with life. My grandiosity would love for the hero of the book to be Mack's pastor. It would be swell if the message of Christ's death on the cross were not robbed of its power. But the book is religious fiction and it does its job well, and it does provide pastoral care, but not Pastoral Care.

I must remember that every person who asks me about the book will read the book from their personal experience. And most of the people who ask me about the book, I know because they are part of my Pastoral Care responsibility. I know that her first husband abused her. I know that the couple who worships regularly lost their first child to stillbirth and that the couple who no longer worships lost their first three children to stillbirths. I have heard the story of his wife's adultery. I know the struggle of the families in my congregation with special-needs children. The book provides just another place to listen to their pain and their ongoing recovery, and then to

gently walk them to the cross, and then joyously and courageously to get on with life – Life!

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## **True or False: The Vocation of Christian Congregations is to be “Public Companions with God in Civil Society.”**

Colleagues,

At last fall’s Crossings conference, keynote speaker Mary Sue Dreier argued for the affirmative on the topic sentence above. Because of schedule crunch, there was little time for discussion, and what did ensue didn’t get to the issue that rankled Phillip Kuehnert. Before Mary Sue’s presentation Phil had done a “small-group” session where he was in effect giving an “op ed” to what she presented as her keynote. Phil came over to me after Dreier’s presentation shaking his head. “Well,” I said, “when her full text is available on the Crossings web site, send me a review and response.” Both Mary Sue and Phil are seasoned Lutheran pastors, both with earned doctorates. She’s now a professor at Luther Seminary, St. Paul, Minnesota. He continues in the congregational pastor’s office. They didn’t interact—so far as I know—before the conference closed and we all went home.

Phil agreed to write up a response, but his pastorate is in Fairbanks, Alaska, and it got cold right after he got home in

October and he had other fires to stoke. Even last week it was still well below zero up there at Zion on the Tundra. But the days are getting longer, the vernal equinox has just passed, and he's gotten the job done. So here it is.

To see Mary Sue Dreier's original full text GO to the Crossings web site <[www.crossings.org](http://www.crossings.org)>. Click on "Conference." Scroll down to her text: "Missional God Outside the Box: Law/Promise and Congregational Vocation."

Peace and Joy!  
Ed Schroeder

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**Review of Dr. Mary Sue Dreier's Keynote  
Presentation: "Missional God Outside the Box"  
By Dr. Philip R. Kuehnert  
Crossings Second International Conference, Oct 19 –  
22.  
Our Lady of the Snows Retreat Center, Belleville,  
Illinois.**

Mary Sue Dreier could not have been more self-effacing. Her sincerity and her passion for her work was obvious. Her sense of humor, "Toto, I have a feeling we're not in Kansas anymore," brought a wave of laughter. And the disciplined approach to her topic showed all the signs of a fine-tuned academic paper with research, footnotes, etc.. But having said all that, I felt like I had missed something when her presentation was done. I also had the feeling that something important had been said that I wasn't able to wrap this frozen brain around.

As a parish pastor, I was particularly interested in her presentation, even eager, especially when she promised that "the

law/promise distinction motivates and shapes missional congregations to take up their vocations.” What was brand new to me, and on first hearing sounded like politically correct theological doublespeak, was what that vocation was: “public companions with God in civil society.” For a parish pastor of almost 40 years serving congregations variously in the lower 9th Ward of New Orleans, in Buckhead in Atlanta, and presently in the frontier, independent-minded mentality of the interior of Alaska, this was off my chart.

When I arrived at Zion Lutheran congregation in Fairbanks 14 years ago, I found that the mad rush for congregations to form mission statements had come and gone. When I questioned the process by which the congregation had arrived at its mission statement, I got rolling eyes and the distinct sense that the process was not pleasant, very possibly a waste of time, but in any case “the statement” was not to be messed with. In spite of its awkwardness, the statement has served our congregation well. As time has gone on, I have generated a great deal of respect for it and we are using it now more than ever. The purpose of ministry at Zion Lutheran Church is to proclaim Christ’s gospel to all people, nurturing faith and making disciples through worship, education, fellowship and service.” More or less, this is what I assumed the vocation of a Lutheran congregation would be in whatever setting.

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*[EHS note. For possible newcomers to this listserve, Phil uses Crossings lingo below in abbreviated form. D1, D2, D3 are the ever-deepening steps of diagnosis, when the Word of God zeroes in on the human malady. First step, D1 = the “sickness” readily seen on the outside. Second step, D2 = the “sickness” on the inside—stuff in the heart—not easy to detect apart from God’s own X-ray, which does indeed expose it. Third step, D-3,*

*focuses the X-ray on the “sick” God-connection–better said, the God-disconnection–at the root of the malady. It’s never a pretty picture. But that’s where healing must happen if any of the other symptoms are to be remedied. In the sequence Phil is using, here comes the shift from God’s “law-analysis” to God’s Gospel-healing of the patient. We call it a new prognosis [“P”] which comes when Christ THE healer enters the sickbay. That too matches the diagnostic steps on their way down to the root, with parallel steps for the way back up: P1, P2, P3.*

*P1 = that first healing step to remedy the root-problem identified by D3 X-ray film. P1 is always and ever some form of proclamation of the crucified and risen Christ, the wounded healer of the “God-problem” afflicting the human race. P2 is the next step “up” to heal the D2 inner illness, and finally P3 traces that healing-at-the-root back to the “outside” where all of us live in our life and relationships in the world.*

*Sometimes Phil will refer to these two sets of three as a “six-stage” or “six-step” sequence where D1,D2,D3 are steps 1,2,3, and the P1,P2,P3 become steps/stages 4,5,6.]*

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I also realized that although I have used the Crossing matrix for the past 12 years in preaching and teaching, I had never attempted to apply the dynamic to congregational life. It’s a theological model – not a practical theology model. But why not? The implications for the congregation in D1 and P3 are profound. The interaction on the “internal” levels of D 2 and P2 leave one at the same time paralyzed in shame and energized for engaging the world. But the “crux” is finally the D3 and P1 – and the context for that is the teaching and, primarily, the proclaiming function that takes place in congregation gathered around Word and Sacrament. I was ready, long over due ready to apply the

CRUX to congregational life.

From Luther Seminary's Assoc. Professor of Congregational Mission and Leadership, I was expecting more. But at the same time I got more than I could digest . So my review centers first, around three deficiencies; and second, three exciting ignition points which has the potential of encouraging the Crossings Community to engage explicitly the practical aspects of congregational life.

The deficiencies: First, her admitted lack of a working knowledge of the "crossings model." Second, Jesus, i.e., her paper does not "necessitate" Christ. Third, the congregations she describes are social service agencies; they lack the marks of Augsburg Confession, Articles V and VII.

Ignition points: First, the point of differentiation between a "civil society organization" and a Lutheran congregation. Second, "God's renewal of the church today for mission." And third, "law/promise mobilizes and energizes us."

### **The Deficiencies**

1. Be Prepared! It seems to me that even a cursory review of any of the hundreds of "crossings" text studies readily available on the [Sabbatheology@crossings.org](mailto:Sabbatheology@crossings.org) web site would have provided Dr. Dreier a basic understanding of "Crossings: A Model for Connecting Scripture and Life." In my final analysis, this is what left me so disoriented at the end of her presentation. She was attempting to relate to something that didn't exist. In the beginning of her presentation, I did not take as seriously as I should have her disclaimer "I do hope that, despite my relative unfamiliarity with the insights and complexities of the Crossings law/promise matrix." Her reference of the "cross over" from stage 6 to stage 1 is something that does not

exist in the crossings model. While I feel petty in pointing this out, it would have been courteous for her to explain why she chose to talk about “stages” rather than the crossings language of “steps” or more specifically D1, D2, etc., the explicit steps of ever-deepening diagnosis and then P1, P2, etc., the explicit steps in the ever-increasing good-news, the new prognosis that comes when Christ enters the diagnostic scene. This was, after all, a Crossings conference. In her defense, not having a functional knowledge of the model, she needed to create this “cross over from stage 6 to stage 1 to answer the questions that she poses for the congregation.

2. Where’s Jesus? The questions that she poses, e.g. “Beyond individualistic efforts, how might congregations turn their attention to the care of their communities in the face of those assaults? How might they live hospitably with God’s mercy and justice among the people in their communities? How does the Spirit of God cultivate imagination and capacity within congregations for this work?” – and which provide the foundation for the rest of her paper – do not necessitate Christ. In other words, the “guts” of the crossings model are not referenced. The “guts” is the hard work of applying God’s accusing activity to the contextual milieu of the congregation (D1), acknowledging the crushing despair and depression for the pastor/parishioner in confronting their idolatry of self and the attending “theology of glory” models of ministry (D2), and finally experiencing the terrifying judgment of God upon all of that, which only God in Christ can resolve (D3). This is the dizzying, overwhelmingly hard work that can be done only by abandoning the language of human wisdom and philosophers ( I Cor 1) and adopting “the message of Christ’s death on the cross. the power of God and the wisdom of God” (again, I Cor 1). This for me is

the heart and genius and unique contribution of the crossings model, the contribution that is so well laid out and demonstrated in Bob Bertram's book, *A Time for Confessing*. This provides the detonator for one of the igniting points.

The turn, the CRUX, is "a Time for Confessing." And while there have certainly been those grand moments in history for confessing – as again identified in Bertram's book – in which Christ was proclaimed, I cannot imagine a time in a congregation's life, especially a congregation that is intentional in doing the D1 and D2 work, that does not call for confessing Christ. This is where things get exciting for those who work the model and why Mary Sue Dreier's language of "Congregations as Public Companions with God in Civil Society" is almost offensive, if not funny and certainly confusing. How can Lutheran congregations allow themselves to ignore their primary identity around Word and Sacrament? Are they ashamed of Jesus? (Romans 1:16)

The combination of the Gospel's proclamation and signage (sacraments), and the power of God it accesses, stands in sharp contrast to so much in congregations which are counterfeit gospels or "gospel plus."

3. Civil Societal Organizations? Which brings me to my final point; are Lutheran congregations, in the world, in their contextual milieu, called to be more than social service agencies? Allowing the really hard work to be done by "God in Christ," the pastor/congregation is now freed and powered up to address those internal issues that paralyze pastors and parishioners when facing the vicissitudes of their own lives and the life of their congregation. I want to engage someone in conversation where the differentiation emerges between the internal life of the

pastor and the internal workings of the congregation. I hope that might be Mary Sue Dreier. And what are the implications of the overlays of the internal workings of the synod/district and national church body for this process? Because if we go “public” dare we risk the Son of Man being ashamed of us when he comes in the glory of His Father with the holy angels, by not confessing his name? But this is the point at which Professor Dreier’s paper hints at, if not provides at least three ignition points.

### **Ignition points:**

1. What’s different? All through her paper, Dr Dreier works on the assumption that there is something different about the congregations she describes. I hesitate to say “Lutheran Congregation” because I fail to find in her paper the distinguishing marks that set Lutheran congregations apart from other worshipping communities. The unique strength of the of the crossings community is its insistence that the Lutheran confessions and Luther have it right when it comes to the twin no-no’s of “no gospel at all” or “gospel plus.” The ignition point that she provides is her extensive work on what she calls Stage 6 and Stage 1. Congregations, congregational leaders and above all, Pastors need to be in the world diagnosing D1, and in the world prognosing P3. In section 2 of her paper “Law/Promise Congregational Understanding” Professor Dreier comes so close when she addresses “Purpose.” But close enough to give us an exciting ignition point as the first and last step of the crossings matrix are contextualized for the congregation in place.  
“...it gives us purpose. We have been given our purpose in our baptisms. Lack of purpose and general dissatisfaction in congregations are not the symptoms of our problem but are at the core of our problem itself. We need not

diagnose them, but they are the law diagnosing us and our need for the redemption and transformation, forgiveness and renewal through Christ's death and resurrection by the power of the Spirit. I believe the arrow that propels us from Stage 6 to Stage 1 provides exactly the purpose our congregations need: it's our neighbor's need.

Ouch! The problem is sin, exposed and deposed to the wrath and judgment of God. Our neighbor's need cannot be the "purpose". Without the "guts" of steps 2 – 5, we are left with the stringent analysis of community organizers and their purpose of making the community a better place. Ironically, the above section is immediately followed by this sentence:

*Our purpose is for Christ to be central in our congregations – to be received, claimed, and lived in the community Christ died to save – and then borne to the neighbor and shared with the neighbor.*

Yes! Here is where Dr Dreier reveals her bias that the congregation is more than a civil societal organization. But what does she mean? And can she mean that without the power of the gospel?

2. Whose Church? "The law/promise framework helps us participate in God's renewal of the church today for mission." Without a doubt the most moving and personal part of the presentation was when Mary Sue shared her daughter's response to having survived a terrible car accident. Something happened to that young woman in the CRUX of her experience that propelled her to be part of the renewed church engaged in mission. That something, I humbly suggest, is seeing and experiencing the proclaimed Christ as the one who took her death (sweet swap) and gave

her His life. "The soul that sinneth, it shall die" – if my 45-year-old confirmation memory work serves me right, this is the way the KJV puts step three, D3, into language. Someone, and I suspect it was her mother, told her at some time in her life about Jesus and related that to her baptism. Again the 2nd section: Professor Dreier presents "some of the ways this law/promise matrix addresses our callings and our challenges in congregational life" and the first is baptism all over the place! But the fuse is damp and she loses spark by getting caught up in some weird story of corporate confession done by Bishop Hansen's hands for "all of us." Yes, the church's mission begins with baptism which at its core is the crux – Jesus dying and rising again – and our daily drowning and regeneration. Our participation in the mission begins in baptism, which takes the individual and the congregation and strips both personal and corporate sin and replaces it with the freedom to "nurture faith and make disciples" which then becomes reality in "worship, education, fellowship and service."

3. Whose Power? Professor Dreier's fourth "way" is that the "law/promise mobilizes and energizes us." This potentially carries more fire for the ignition of local congregations than anything else. St. Paul in one of his nastier moods says (again KJV) "knowing therefore the terror of the Lord we persuade men." In Paul's better moods (Romans 1 and I Cor 1 and many other places) he makes it clear that the message of Christ's death on the cross is the power (and wisdom) of God. "He died .that those who live, should live, not for themselves, but for him who died for them and rose again." This ultimately means confronting sin and evil. Without the acknowledgment that in the proclamation of "law/promise" something more than the battle of good and evil is being waged, Star Wars like, there is no power

or plan to move in mission. Congregations need power and plans. And both power and plan begin in working the law against the promise and the promise against the law. Philip Jenkins in his *The New Faces of Christianity* makes the amazing observation that “Surely, though, it is wildly improbable that modern Northern-world Christians – the mainline denominations, at least – might accept a belief in the demonic or in spiritual warfare, even as metaphors. Yet the further Christianity moves from ideas of evil, the less intelligible doctrines such as salvation and redemption become: salvation and redemption from what?” p. 184. What the Crossings matrix offers Professor Dreier is the invitation to consider the heart beat of the Lutheran congregation its primary commitment to proclaim Jesus. That means making acceptable the belief in the reality of sin and God’s wrath, acknowledging the terrible effects of God’s accusing activity in the world and in our communities. This then, necessitate the proclamation of the Gospel.

What Professor Dreier’s presentation offers the Crossings community, is the invitation to be more intentional in its D1 and P3 work. Heeding her example and her research, the Crossings community and its work will be enriched in those areas where the greatest damage (D1) and the greatest good (P3) are experienced.

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## **Burned-Out Biblicist?—Thoughts**

# about Bart D. Ehrman

[A PRE-SCRIPT.

God willing, Marie and I will be travelling to Augsburg, Germany, this coming Monday (3.23) for a week-long conference sponsored by the Lutheran World Federation. Its theme is "Theology in the Life of Lutheran Churches: Transformative Perspectives and Practices Today."

My contribution—you've heard it before—is titled: "LUTHERANISM'S CRYING NEED: A MISSION THEOLOGY FOR THE 21ST CENTURY. Luther's Own Mission Theology—Contemporary Lutheranism's Best-Kept Secret."

Should you wish to see the current version of that proposal, it's available on the conference website. [http://lutheranworld.org/What\\_We\\_Do/DTS/TLC\\_Augsburg/Papers.html#SemII](http://lutheranworld.org/What_We_Do/DTS/TLC_Augsburg/Papers.html#SemII)

Click on "Seminar II."

Scroll down to that title.

I didn't make the cut to present to the plenary. But one former student of mine did! Among the 100 participants—from 30-plus countries—listed, there are also half a dozen others like that. So not to worry.

From Sunday evening (3.21) till Saturday morning (4.4) don't expect to find us home.

*For the two ThTh postings while we're gone, Phil Kuehnert, pastor at Zion Lutheran Church in Fairbanks, Alaska, will be the Thursday Theologian, with two contributions from his "permafrost" parish up there on the tundra. They're already in the pipeline(!) and they are potent.]*

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Colleagues,

It seems as though every time Bart Ehrman writes another book about the New Testament – ten by my count, the last one just this month–Terry Gross interviews him on her National Public Radio program “Fresh Air.” This time, according to the NPR web site, it was 38 minutes and 19 seconds on March 4, 2009 for his just-published “Jesus Interrupted: Revealing the Hidden Contradictions in the Bible (And Why We Don’t Know About Them).” Since Terry Gross is one of the superstars on NPR and attracts zillions of listeners, Ehrman gets an audience that his publisher’s own PR staff would die for. They don’t have to. Terry does it for them. But . . .

But every time Terry gives Bart a “fresh” airing on Fresh Air, it’s nothing fresh anymore. He always confesses that he’s a former “genuine” fundamentalist (formed in his youthful faith by Moody Bible Institute and Wheaton College) and has now become an agnostic. So book after book—to use the classical phrase—is his “apologia pro vita sua,” his defense for why he’s now an agnostic. And it borders on boredom. But he gives his new books new (and teasing) titles, like the longish one above, so Terry has him back once more. But it’s the same message over and over again: “what you Christians believe about Jesus is built on sand. You should all become agnostics like me.” Some sample titles are “God’s Problem: How the Bible Fails to Answer Our Most Important Question” and “Misquoting Jesus: The Story Behind Who Changed the Bible and Why.”

My hunch is that Terry gets some Schadenfreude from his repeated demolition efforts. It sometimes surfaces in her interviews—and possibly ditto for Bart. And Terry is not averse to giving evidence in interviews of her own Jewish heritage (or is hers a Jewish agnosticism?)

Back to Bart. After Moody and Wheaton he went then to Princeton Seminary for graduate study, ready to lance the liberals he knew he'd find there. But lo and behold, they "splained" to him the good sense of using historical critical scholarship for reading the NT. Even more, they convinced him. And with that his former faith—a literalist faith in the historical inerrancy of every word in the Bible—collapsed. And since he didn't find "faith in Christ's promise"—the REAL faith offered in the NT—to supplant his "other" faith in Biblicism's "other" Gospel, he abandoned the entire Christian enterprise. He even went back to his former congregation and told the SRO audience why he was now an agnostic. Faith must be built on historical facts—and he now has them. All other ground is sinking sand.

Bart D. Ehrman has a very "bully pulpit" for proclaiming his agnostic faith. He is the James A. Gray Distinguished Professor and Chair of the Department of Religious Studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. His books make him a regular on the New York Times bestseller list. But "new" it is no longer. It's the old line of burned-out fundamentalists. And it's also not "fresh air" any longer, Terry, but tired and stale repetition: "Each Gospel writer has a different message. Besides that, the original manuscripts (none of which still exist) have been 'changed' by partisan copyists and interpreters already back in ancient days. So which one can you trust? None of them." And with that, according to his lights, the Christian faith goes poof.

Chris Repp's posting of two weeks ago [TT559] did indeed give us a "fresh" way to cope with the broad variety we encounter in the NT texts. But Chris heard Good News coming from those texts—even with names and places and nuances varied and diverse. Ehrman's youthful fundamentalist faith—if true to form—was looking "just for the facts," the right stuff to believe as he read the Bible. When Princeton led him to see that the facts were hard to

verify—yes, sometimes impossible to verify—his faith collapsed. No wonder, his Biblicist faith was itself what Jesus calls “a house built on sand.”

Had he heard Christ’s own words speaking to HIM in those texts he’s studying (for example, in Matt. 9) “You’ll be glad to hear this, Bart, your sins are forgiven,” he might have found a rock, THE rock, on which to build his house of faith. But from his unending stream of “Don’t you believe it” books it is clear that his house of unfaith hasn’t yet found the rock.

Agnostic “faith” (an “I don’t know” faith) admits at the very outset that it’s working with sand. “I don’t know anything solid to build a faith on.” From Terry’s interview with Bart earlier this month about his latest book, we see that he’s still in the sandbox there in North Carolina, despite his academic and popular renown and royalty checks. This newest book is another sandcastle, marvelous in structure and design. Terry enjoys having him give her a tour around the castle. But it’s all made of sand. You’ll never survive any stormy weather—surely not the “Sturm und Drang” now afflicting our entire world—if you take up residence in Ehrman’s edifice.

Even more important is this, I think. The fact that he elicits such a huge fan club—NYT bestseller, guaranteed(?) “Fresh Air” interviews, etc.—to join him in playing (or agonizing) in his sandbox is another signal that the USA is a mission field. A wide one. In this case mission to a specific sector of our people. How to articulate the Good News of Christ’s Promise as something Good and something New for burned-out Biblicists, who apparently never heard it yet. And their number is not limited to Moody or Wheaton graduates like Ehrman. They’re also members in all the mainline churches—if, like Ehrman, they haven’t already left.

Should any of you on this listserve have resources for this specific mission field, let me know and we can pass them around.

And to Terry Gross (if this should ever get to her): Give us a break. So Ehrman has a one-string banjo. So do many of us. Me too. But you've given us his melody many times. We non-agnostics can now hum his tune ourselves. Enough already! How about this? Lori Cornell is the Bible Study guru for our Crossings website. She's moved beyond Biblicism and hasn't burned out into agnosticism. She's gotchutzpah not unlike your own. Why not interview her for a change? You would enjoy it. It's called fairness. Justice. Equal time. That even-hand which we regularly enjoy when listening to you on Fresh Air—with the possible exception of Bart Ehrman interviews. Fair is fair.

Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder

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## **Reading the Bible in Mission to the World.**

Colleagues,

Episcopalian and ELCA Lutheran pastors in Cleveland, Ohio, get together now and then for liturgy, listening and learning. Last week I was the Lutherans' "offering" to their Episcopal colleagues for this spring's "Lutepisc" gathering at Messiah Lutheran in the west-Cleveland suburb of Fairview Park. My assigned topic: "Our Common Conundrum: Reading the Bible in Mission to the World."

The premise was that the sexuality-fracas for both denominations these days is patently a conflict about how to read the Bible. Second premise was that, even apart from that fracas, both of us—with our shrinking denominational memberships—are fumbling Christ's mission mandate.

The presentation went something like this:

1. The president of the American Society of Missiology calls me a “late-in-life” missiologist. After nigh onto forty years being “just” a theology prof, the mission bug has bitten, and in the 16 years since retirement, that bug has kept me itching and scratching. Within the ASM, where I've been a member even before retirement, I've sought to link the “Augsburg Aha!” of those years as theology prof to the nitty-gritty of the mission world. Most of you know that from reading these ThTh posts. So within the ASM (and its international counterpart IAMS) my one-string-banjo keeps strumming the tune of “Augsburg Catholicism” [AC] as the best melody for mission theology and practice. My monotone sometimes ruffles feathers in the ASM club, but I'm really just strumming for “equal time.” That is equal time for Augsburg Catholicism alongside the other two major tunes in the missiological music world—monotones in their own way—of Roman Catholicism [RC] and Calvinist Catholicism [CC]. The Calvinist banjo (as I told the ThTh readership last summer) dominated the entire program at our 2008 ASM assembly. Four speakers from Princeton, all strumming the CC tune and then an RC guest from Europe whose opening photo for her Powerpoint presentation was none other than Karl Barth, the CC superstar of the 20th century. Her ecumenical pitch was to link her RC missiology to that of Barth's CC. Which she did indeed do. But that common cantus firmus between CC and RC is another topic.
2. Since I've been hobnobbing with the missiologists I've

added the word "context" to my theological vocabulary. So what is our American context on this first week in March 2009, the specific turf where Christ's "so send I you" puts us? American economy in shambles, foxes guarding the hen-house, war never-ending—you add to the list. What's under the surface of our American context?

3. Parker Palmer, America's brilliant Quaker social analyst and teacher, was interviewed on Bill Moyers' Journal two weeks ago. "Our American daily life is built on illusion," he told us. He then launched into a discussion of faith as a misunderstood word. Faith is not a set of beliefs we are supposed to sign up for. It is instead the courage to face our illusions and allow ourselves to be disillusioned by them. It is the courage to walk through our illusions and dispel them. He states that the opposite of faith is not doubt, it is fear – fear of abandoning illusions because of our comfort level with them. Was he optimistic about America's future? Not yet. Not until we get widespread awareness—and then "confession"—that "the party is over."
4. A few days ago Steve Hitchcock sent me an article by Walter Brueggemann [Theology Today, Vol. 65 (2008) 285-311]. "Prophetic Ministry in the National Security State." Here's the abstract that preceded the full text:

*"Faithful Christian preaching in the United States is in the context of the ideology of the national security state, an ideology that permeates every facet of our common life. In that difficult and demanding context, this essay urges that Christian preaching must go back to basics, that everything depends on the mystery of faith, that 'Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again.' From that elemental claim, it is proposed that at the center of faith and faithful experience is an abyss that in the Old Testament came as the destruction of Jerusalem and in the U.S. national security state comes*

*to be epitomized as '9/11.' Focusing on the abyss, according to that ideology, evokes denial about going into the abyss and despair about ever getting out of it. The prophetic rejoinder to such denial is truth telling, and the prophetic response to despair is hope telling. This truth has a Friday tone, and this hope has a Sunday flavor. Such truth and hope expose the ideology of the national security state as a promise that cannot be kept and invite alternative discipleship that issues in joy and freedom outside that system of death."*

Note Brueggemann's words "the ideology of the national security state." Ideologies are soteriologies, proposed ways of salvation ["Heil, Hitler!" did not mean "Hail to Hitler." It meant "Heil (salvation) comes from Hitler."] They offer their own gospels. They call to their own style of discipleship. But it's all phony. Even worse, a system of death. Brueggemann tells us that they make "promises that cannot be kept."

5. Illusion and Denial. Denial that the party is over. Denial that capitalism – like communism when the Berlin Wall fell – died when the Wall of Wall Street fell. Humpty-dumpty. Goliath with head severed. Illusion that "All the king's horses and all the king's men" could indeed put Humpty-Dumpty together again. But it will take trillions of dollars, we are told, and we can do it. Illusion. And beneath illusion and denial, at an ever deeper level, blindness. Not seeing God, America's creator AND critic, giving our empire its comeuppance.
6. Even worse. One OT passage that Brueggemann does not cite—among the many many in his full article—is for such a time as this. It's in the story of the Egyptian army pursuing the Israelites through the Red Sea. Why did the

empire's military power collapse and the unarmed Israelites escape unharmed? "God knocked the wheels off their chariots." If our people didn't catch the meaning of Francis Coppola's movie about Vietnam a few years ago, "Apocalypse Now," will they do so now? They could, says Brueggemann—at least those in Christian congregations could—if there were "prophetic preachers" in those congregations. More on this below.

7. And what are we Lutherans and Episcopalians doing about THIS context in which we and our people live? Very little. For the Clevelanders I read three headlines from "Episcopal Life" Feb. 2009, the national newspaper of the ECUSA. Ditto from the ELCA. They were all about the sexuality fracas—and for the Episcopalians, the church property and jurisdictional snarls that have arisen therefrom. We are immersed in the sound of silence. How to interpret our common silence—both in preaching and in mission? We may be stuck. Even more severe, we may be "struck" with a speech-impediment that we cannot cure. The prophet Amos tells us of a "silence" of the Word of God in his day. Not only that no one was picking up any signals from God in those days, but possibly even worse, that no one was able any longer to utter God's message, to let God's voice be heard. The whole nation was smitten deaf and dumb. The Biblical record reports that God has also knocked off the wheels from churchly chariots—not just those of national security empires.

8. When the Word of God deserts a land, it doesn't simply evaporate. Its departure is God's judgment on the land it deserts, but it then moves somewhere else. Luther called that the "Platzregen" effect. Here's a quote from 1520:

*"Germany has never before heard so much of God's Gospel as now. There was scant trace of it in our earlier history. But if we let it pass by without thanks and*

*honor, I am afraid that we shall have to suffer plague and grimmer darkness. My dear Germans . . . make use of God's Word of Grace while it is there. For know this, that the Word of God's grace is like a "Platzregen" (a sweeping thundershower and downpour), which never returns to where it has already been. Paul brought it to Greece; from there it has also gone and now they have the Turks (=Muslims). Rome and the Latin lands have had their visitation, but it has gone. And you Germans must not think that you will have it for ever, for it will not stay where there is ingratitude and contempt. Therefore let all take hold and keep hold who can."*

9. The Platzregen in Ethiopia. I then read out loud to the Clevelanders the "in-betweenner" I had posted to this listserve a week or so ago about the Platzregen in Ethiopia, that e-message from Dinku Lamessa Bato, national coordinator for University Student Ministry. Dinku told us of the 185,000 newly baptized during the one-month evangelism campaign in the course of the 50th anniversary celebration of the establishment of the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus earlier this year.
10. If this is indeed our USA context—both for Lutherans and Episcopalians—if Palmer and Brueggemann are right in reading the signs of the times, how to proceed? Has the Platzregen actually departed? Will there be no more "Word of God" to be heard, no matter what we do? It's happened before. Depends on whether there is anyone left to proclaim it. Even in Amos's day, God "took him" [same Hebrew verb as Elijah being taken in the fiery chariot], Amos tells us, took him from his farmer-calling and sent him to bring the Platzregen one more time to Samaria. Brueggemann's call for "prophetic preaching" indicates that he thinks that still could happen in our

parched land. So what is “prophetic preaching?” He puts a twist on what “prophetic” means. It is not what fundamentalists say: predictive history about the end-times, Armageddon and the rapture. Nor is it what liberals have made of it with their mantra of “speaking truth to power.” Rather it is “truth-telling” (that’s law-diagnosis in Lutheran lingo) and “hope-telling” (the Gospel promise) to God’s own people, to our own congregations. Back to our fundamental Christian mission. Finally back to the Bible—with the Bible’s own proposed lenses for how to read the Bible. And then how to read the world.

11. We’ll follow that sequence, I told the Clevelanders. Not first “back to the Bible and then to mission,” but vice versa: first the mission agenda, then how to find THE Gospel in the Bible, then back to the world with that Gospel. So three phases:
12. Duplex missio dei. God’s double mission in the world. God’s two administrations (diakooniai in Greek) and two covenants (diatheekai in Greek), as St. Paul spells out his own mission theology in 2 Corinthians 3-5. [If you’ve been reading these Thursday Theology posts for even a little while, you know what the Clevelanders heard on this topic. So I won’t repeat it here.]
13. Using this bi-focal lens to read the Bible and answer the question: Why Jesus? [Ditto]
14. Ash Wednesday’s second lesson, just last week, 2 Cor 5 and the mission particulars—theology and practice—now that “God has entrusted to us Christ’s ministry of reconciliation” for the world. [Ditto]

And that triad brought the presentation to closure. Should you wish to review those three phases, you might check the key terms on the Crossings website <[www.crossing.org](http://www.crossing.org)> using the internal Google system to track them down.

Peace and joy!  
Ed Schroeder

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# **Many different Gospels, or one and the same Gospel, throughout the New Testament?**

Colleagues,

Chris Repp, ELCA pastor in Carbondale, Illinois, and former theology professor at the Lutheran Seminary in St. Petersburg, Russia, keeps sending me stuff. To my delight. Here's another one that is too good to keep just for myself. So it comes to you as this week's ThTh post.

Peace and joy!  
Ed Schroeder

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**Review of David Rhoads, "Diversity in the New Testament,"  
in Currents in Theology and Mission, vol. 35, no. 5  
(October 2008), 354-62,  
by Chris Repp**

This brief article in the 2nd Festschrift edition of Currents for Ralph Klein caught my attention because it would seem to have radical implications for anyone who might be interested either in the Lutheran project or in ecumenism.

Dr. Rhoads, professor of New Testament at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago (ELCA), writes that he has “struggled much of [his] career to understand and appreciate diversity among different writings of the New Testament.” (354) He has now concluded that this diversity amounts to “multiple ‘gospels.’” In order to demonstrate this, he takes his reader through seven short case studies: the four gospels, Galatians, James and Romans.

But does the undeniable diversity of these texts really rise to the level of distinct gospels? Dr. Rhoads’ presentation is unconvincing. In fact his case studies do not reveal as much diversity as one might expect based upon his premise. According to him, Mark seeks to “create a society in which people served each other,” (355) while Luke seeks to empower his hearers to “provide a countercultural community that models what the world \*should\* be like,” (356) and John, in Revelation, “calls for people to ‘withdraw’ from the Roman Empire—by refusing to engage in economic activity that has anything to do with the empire and its coinage.” (360) The latter sounds rather like the countercultural communities of Luke and Mark. (Matthew’s obvious concern for community is omitted in Dr. Rhoads’ presentation, in favor of an emphasis on individual integrity. Also overlooked in this regard is John’s overt concern for unity among the disciples.) Other unifying themes also emerge, such as the concern for the poor shown by both Luke and James (but not Matthew? – particularly chapter 25?)

At the root of the problem in this article lies Dr. Rhoads’ use of the word gospel. He does not use it in the classic Lutheran sense of God’s unmerited act of forgiveness/reconciliation in Jesus, or even – so it seems to me – in the broader sense of the message of God’s saving activity. In fact, it’s difficult to pin down just what gospel means for him. A case in point is his survey of Mark, where he writes of the gospel as “God’s power to

heal, exorcize, forgive, transform, and restore community,” but also writes of “the gospel of the kingdom” (which does not seem to be the same thing) and “the gospel of power in service.” This latter “gospel” is further explained as Jesus’ call to take up the cross and follow him: “Those who will save/secure their lives will lose them, but those who will lose/risk their lives for me and the good news will save/secure them.” Is Dr. Rhoads suggesting that even a single New Testament document may contain multiple gospels? Interestingly, he does not see the death and resurrection of Jesus in Mark as gospel (or at least he does not say so here) – an act of God that removes the barrier between God and humans, as revealed in the tearing of the temple curtain (Mk 15:38). Instead, the death of Jesus functions as *\*model\** of the “gospel of power in service”, “a model that forged a covenant with all who would follow.” (355) In considering Matthew, Dr. Rhoads does not speak explicitly of gospel, but of a challenge or a call to be perfect/righteous, which in Lutheran language is usually called law.

At the same time, there is an overarching sense of God’s activity throughout Dr. Rhoads’ presentation, which to my mind implicitly argues against his multiple-gospel thesis. In the Gospel of John he identifies God’s action in Jesus to “restore the relationship between human beings and the creator.” (357) In Galatians, Jesus’ death removes the curse of the law. In James, God seeks to “rectify and reverse the inequities in the world that result from the mentality of limited goods.” (359) In Revelation, God is in the process of ending the imperial order and creating a new heaven and earth. (360) These are not different gospels, in my view, but aspects of the one gospel: God at work in Jesus Christ on our behalf, to undo the consequences of our sin and to restore/renew the good creation.

Dr. Rhoads concludes his article with five reflections. In the second, he writes: “Our contemporary denominations are based, in

part, upon different writings in the New Testament. As such, the differences among church groups today are not a mark of the brokenness of Christ (except when we are in conflict with each other) but are rather a sign of the rich diversity that was there from the beginning of Christianity. Because diversity is constitutive of Christianity from its inception, we can celebrate the differences among us, seek to honor them without collapsing them into one church, learn from one another, and work for a unity that preserves our differences. It takes many different churches to bear the full witness of the New Testament writings.” (361) Dr. Rhoads has rightly concluded here that if there are indeed different gospels, then there must be different churches as well. And although he speaks of “seeking unity,” he does not give us any idea of what we might base such a unity on, given our different gospels. Perhaps he should have taken his thesis to its logical conclusion and asserted that the different denominations really amount to different religions, worshiping, effectively, different gods.

Given the state of affairs that Dr. Rhoads suggests, I wonder why a given denomination should even bother, in its reading, preaching, and teaching, to venture beyond the one text from which it draws its identity, its distinctive gospel. And I wonder which we Lutherans would be forced to choose, given Dr. Rhoads’ assertion that “Paul develops a different theology in each of his letters in response to the local situation he is addressing in each church.” (358) We cannot even have both Romans and Galatians! But he does not seem to be aware, or at any rate to believe, that this follows from his multiple-gospel thesis. His fourth concluding reflection begins: “...when we as Christians teach and preach the New Testament, we will grow most if we seek to preserve the distinct vision of each of its writings. If we do not, the danger is that we (as Lutherans say) will preach law-gospel sermons not only on Paul but also on Mark

and Matthew and John and James and all the other writings.” (361-2) So, Apology, article 4 is in fact wrong when it insists that “All Scripture should be divided into these two main topics: the law and the promises” (Kolb, Wengert, 121), and the entire Crossings endeavor is misguided. In fact, the entire Lutheran endeavor is misguided, particularly its assertion that what unites the church catholic is the gospel that it preaches (Augsburg Confession, article VII). And not only that, but the modern ecumenical movement, and its goal of visible unity among Christians, lacks any reason for its existence and any chance of success.

Dr. Rhoads continues: “What I want to promote is the idea that we know the world view of each writing well enough to see each passage in its own literary context. Then we will preach Markan sermons on the Gospel of Mark and Lukan sermons on the Gospel of Luke and Galatian sermons on the Letter to the Galatians ...” (362) Of course it is very important to understand the “distinctive visions” of each NT writing, and not be quick, for example, to interpret Mark in Matthean terms, or Revelation in terms of 2 Peter (see Dr. Barbara Rossing’s very good article that follows Rhoads’ in the same edition of Currents). But if we give up the idea that there is one gospel at the core of these NT writings, we give up what makes us Lutheran. Maybe even what makes us Christian. I just don’t know how to “honor the diversity” of “another gospel.” Nor does Paul – which makes the inclusion of Galatians as a test case for Dr. Rhoads’ thesis particularly ironic. The topic sentences of that writing are the following: “I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel – not that there is another gospel ... But even if we or an angel from heaven should proclaim to you a gospel contrary to what we proclaimed to you, let that one be accursed!” (Gal. 1:6-8) I wonder how Dr. Rhoads “honors

diversity” in this case? (Can the intolerant really be tolerated?)

Dr. Rhoads concludes with this paragraph: “There is no denying the diversity of the New Testament. The question is: How will we see it and what will we do with it? To face it squarely, to honor it, to struggle with it, to learn from it, and to see our own diversity mirrored in it will only serve to benefit the church and the world of our time.” If I had not read what precedes this paragraph, I could wholeheartedly agree. Diversity is there. It must be acknowledged, even appreciated. But what I celebrate is what we have in common as Christians in spite of our differences, which I continue to hope is “one faith, one Lord, one baptism...” (Eph. 4:5), in other words, one church created and sustained by one gospel. And I have to answer “the question” above in a way that does not contradict Galatians 1:6-9 or Ephesians 4:1-6. That’s where I’d have to stand. (Unless persuaded by Scripture and clear reason, of course.)

Chris Repp, Pastor  
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Carbondale, Illinois

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# **Lutheranism’s Crying Need: A Mission Theology for the 21st Century**

*Luther’s Own Mission Theology—Contemporary Lutheranism’s Best-Kept Secret*

Edward H. Schroeder

A contribution to the LWF conference at Augsburg, Germany, March 26-31, 2009 From Edward H. Schroeder, St. Louis, Missouri, USA

**ABSTRACT**

*Since Warneck (1892), Luther's own theology has been ignored as a resource for the church's mission. Yet, growing Lutheran churches like the Ethiopian EECMY point to the "evangelisch" Gospel foundation for their growth, reminding that the true Gospel is proclaimed over-and-against "other" competing gospels in Luther's understanding. As much as Luther critiqued mono-covenantal theologies in his day, we need to reword for our time the "missio Dei" as a double mission of God, distinguishing Moses and Christ (John) and/or "law and promise" (Paul) to interpret God's two-handed mission operation to the world. To articulate this theology, Luther's rich word pictures of (1) "missio" as "promissio"; (2) promise pebble-dropping; (3) the Gospel as a "Platzregen" ("Thunderstorm"); (4) the Gospel's "Froelicher Wechsel" ("Joyous Exchange"); and, (5) the notion of the "Deus Absconditus" ("Hidden God") can provide vast resources for the church's mission understanding today. (Stephen C. Krueger)*

Ever since Gustav Warneck decreed that Luther had no mission theology (1892), Luther has been generally ignored, considered irrelevant, in ecumenical mission discussions. Also, sadly, among Lutheran 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.

The conference theme is THEOLOGY IN THE LIFE OF LUTHERAN CHURCHES: TRANSFORMATIVE PERSPECTIVES AND PRACTICES TODAY.

My thesis is: If there is to be any future for LUTHERAN CHURCHES on into the 21st century, the primal place where TRANSFORMATIVE PERSPECTIVES AND PRACTICES are called for is in Lutheran Mission Theology and Practice.

In the “theology and life of Lutheran churches,” neither in Europe nor in my North American homeland are there many signs that this is happening. Mission programs, evangelism programs, renewal proposals abound, but as an ELCA missiologist –one who DOES know what Lutheran mission theology really is–recently said of the mission program in his own denomination: “it is a program without a Lutheran theology, possibly without a theology at all.”

The most obvious place where “transformative perspectives and practices” within Lutheranism are occurring, as LWF publications inform us, is in the Horn of Africa, in the EECMY–Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus. Here is an LWF member church without even the word Lutheran in its name, but instead the “old” word for Lutheran, “evangelical.” Which signals what mission is all about–The Evangel, the Good News. More about this below.

Listen first to this EECMY report of February 26, 2009. Talk about “transformative perspectives and practices!”

Dear Friends in Christ,

We are filled with joy as the Lord has continued His mighty work of salvation amongst us during the last few months where thousands of people came to the knowledge of Christ in the course of the 50th Jubilee celebration of the establishment of the EECMY as a national church and its 10th birth anniversary. The one month evangelism campaign which was the main part of the celebration has caused the sharing of the Gospel to about 370,000 new people and the

salvation of about 185, 000 people nationwide. While most members of the church have participated in sharing the Good News with those who did not heard it yet, students are the ones who played the greatest role. Since the outreach effort has continued in some synods exact figure will be known as soon as information reaches us. For me, this was the crown event as it holds the real meaning of 50th Jubilee in line with the idea of freedom of slaves in the Old Testament. The other part of the celebration was where missionaries of past and present were recognized in a celebration held at the national convention center. The jubilee celebration was finally concluded with a grand dinner where senior government officials were invited including the president of Ethiopia, Girma W/Giorgis. On this occasion the Word of God is read and songs were sung which might be the first opportunity for most of the senior government officials including the president to hear the Gospel in such a way. The evening also marked the recognition of some celebrities in the church's life and ministry where medals, titles and prizes were awarded.

Yours in His service,  
Dinku Lamessa Bato  
National Coordinator  
EECMY University Student Ministry

[EECMY membership makes it the 2nd largest church in world Lutheranism—over five million members in last year's listing by the LWF from 20,000 of fifty years ago. Second only to the 6 million reported by the Lutheran church of Sweden.]

Lutheran = "evangelisch." It's all about the Gospel. So said the Augsburg Confessors—here in this very city 479 yrs ago. It's all about the Gospel, and the Gospel's own movement into and around the world. But for Lutheran theology, that always raises the

question: Which Gospel? For already in the N.T. "other" gospels arose to supplant the genuine one. Many of the NT "books" are reports about differing gospels in conflict in the very first generation of Christ-confessors, the first Christian congregations that ever existed. Has it been any different throughout church history? Is it any different now? Gerhard Ebeling's memorable word about church history is applicable here: "Church history is the history of conflict in Biblical interpretation." And at the center of that variety of Biblical interpretation are varying answers to the question: Just what is THE Gospel?

If "Lutherisch" = "evangelisch," a particular notion of Gospel, how does that link to Mission?

Martin Luther's thesis about missions—if he had had one—would be this: "A mission field is anywhere that 'other gospels' are being proclaimed and trusted." Christian mission is offering—N.B. this verb—the genuine Gospel to replace the "other" ones.

Therefore, Luther's mission field was the church and world of the Holy Roman Empire of his day. Is our day any different? Where are "other gospels" to be found in our day? As much inside our churches as out there in the "secular" world. Not much different from what was confessed here in Augsburg on June 25, 1530.

A spinoff from that gospel-focus is Luther's critique of the mono-covenantal theology in his day, which claimed that everything God is doing in the world is all of one piece, fundamentally grace (according to the ancient scholastic axiom of "God's grace perfecting nature"). We need to reword Luther's proposal for our own time vis-à-vis the *missio-Dei* mantra that has dominated Roman and protestant missiology since the Willingen mission conference in 1952.

Last month I was interviewed on Luther's "mission theology" by Nelson Jennings, the editor of *MISSIOLOGY*, the journal of the American Society of Missiology. Our "conversation" is scheduled to be published in the April 2009 issue of the journal. Here's the give and take.

Jennings said: **Let's follow this train of thought a bit. *Missio Dei* has been a central missiological concept for at least several decades. In your writings about Luther's mission-theology you have advocated speaking of *duplex missio Dei*. Would you mind encapsulating what you mean by this "Double Mission of God" metaphor?**

My response: "Mission" is not a common term in the writings of the Reformers. No surprise: the vocabulary for their theology comes from the Bible, where the word "mission" is not to be found. The term came into Christian vocabulary from European political and military colonialism in the post-Reformation era. But if Martin Luther had used that term – designating what God's project was in and for God's creation – he would have identified God's two missions in the world. And that duplex mission – God's two different projects in the one creation – he found spelled out in the Gospel of John and the letters of St. Paul, the two heavyweight theologians of the NT.

**Jennings: Keep going.**

In the Gospel of John it comes already in the Prologue: "The law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ." Both Moses and Jesus were clearly God's agents, God's "missioners," but their missions were different. In Paul's epistles those two very different missions (Moses' and Christ's, "law and promise" in Paul's vocabulary), both coming from one and the same God, surface frequently, especially in Romans and Galatians. In 2 Cor. 3-5 he spells them out – and also details

the differences. Here he uses two different words, each of which is his synonym for what we mean today by God's mission. One is "ministry" (*diakoonia*, in Greek). God has two of these, two different diaconates, operating in the world. The other synonym for what we today call mission is "covenant" (*diatheke*, in Greek). God has two covenants, two different covenants, functioning among humankind. Paul's predicates to each of these two missions are well known. One is letter, one Spirit. One brings death, one gives life. One has modest glory, one has glory "beyond all measure." One finally fades away, one lasts forever. When these two missions connect with people, one is Bad News, one Good News. For in one "God counts trespasses," while in the other "God is in Christ reconciling sinners unto himself, NOT counting trespasses."

**Jennings: And the connection with today's understanding of mission?**

What we today understand as Christ's mission mandate is clearly the second one. But if we forget, or ignore, the prior one, as God's own mission from which the Christ-mission sets us free, then our gospel is too small. Gospels that are "too small" are finally "other Gospels," and not the Good News intended for all humankind from the crucified and risen Messiah.

**Jennings: So in light of your explanation of how the phrase *missio Dei* risks misrepresenting the gospel, should missiologists continue to use the phrase but with explanation, discard it altogether (and use, for example, *duplex missio Dei*), or what?**

Labels such as *missio dei* or *duplex missio dei* are not unimportant, but more important, of course, in human language is what metaphors point to. So in order to point to God's two operations in this one world of His – that doubleness pointed

out by St. John in his prologue and Paul's frequent references to God's two ministries, two covenants – we could stick with *missio Dei* and add “duplex.” Thus we missiologists could work out the implications of God's *duplex missio* in scripture, in mission history and for our 21st century. But that's still Latin, of course, nobody's native language today. So why not come up with something in English, the *lingua franca* (sic!) of today's ecumenical missiology?

### **To wit?**

Well, why not go back to the Bible? Classic for some of us are Luther's own favorite biblical terms for this *duplex missio*, God's left hand work and God's right hand work. Metaphors, of course. Same one and only God, but different works done with the differing hands. God's right-hand mission is centered in the One who now “sits at the right hand of God the Father,” Christ the world's redeemer. That's God's salvation work from way back at the beginning of the Old Testament culminating in Christ and continuing right on up to the *parousia*. God's left-hand mission is all the other works of God that preserve and continue creation, protect it from total destruction, hold us humans accountable as caretakers of that creation, but do not (yet) turn sinners into Christ-trusters.

### **What about language for non-Lutherans in our American Society of Missiology?**

If my suggestions are “too Lutheran,” then back to St. John's “Moses and Christ” in his prologue, or St. Paul and his use of the umbrella terms “law” for God's left-hand agenda and “promise”

for God's salvific work of his right hand. In his major epistles – Romans, Corinthians, Galatians – this law/promise duplex is Paul's blueprint for articulating God's duplex mission and

message to the whole world. We could even appropriate that line from the American folk-hymn as our missiological mantra: "He's got the whole world in his hands." But then always add: "Yes, both of them!"

End of that conversation.

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Luther's journey to becoming a mission theologian was his journey as a reformer. It began with his "Aha!" about the gospel and that began with his "Aha!" about how to read the scriptures in a manner very different from that of his own prior scholastic theological formation. He speaks of it in Tischreden (Table Talk) 5518 as a breakthrough. After describing his "old" way of reading and teaching the Bible, using the ancient "nature and grace" paradigm, he relates his discovery of the "discrimen inter legem et euangelium." "Aber do ich das discrimen fande, quod aliud esset lex, aliud euangelium, da riss ich her durch." "Durchreissen" equals a breakthrough. From this breakthrough followed not only the new evangelical catholic theology, but also a new evangelical missiology.

Strangely, perhaps, is how his mission theology surfaces in the many sermons he preached on Ascension Day, taking the lectionary gospel for that day (Mark 16) and ringing the changes on Mark's version of the Great Commission.

Several of Luther's "signature" expressions—bons mots that have become standard lingo in Lutheran theology—emerge from these sermons (also in other of his works) to help us articulate his mission theology: First off is the overarching rubric "The secret of Missio is Promissio." In addition these metaphor/word-pictures: Pebble, Platzregen (thundershower), Froehlicher Wechsel (joyful exchange—in American slang "a sweet swap"), and Deus Absconditus (God hidden).

I wish to present these terms to whatever audience I have at Augsburg and discuss with these colleagues the mission-theology resources they offer.

## **1. The secret of Missio is Promissio.**

The Gospel is a promise. This is axiomatic in Lutheran confessional theology. What understanding of mission arises when you begin with this axiom? A fuller treatment of that axiom can be found on the Crossings web site at <https://crossings.org/archive/bob/DoingTheologyinMission.pdf>

Relevance today. We witness today the worldwide failure of mega-promises. Promises which people by the millions (billions?) loved and trusted. The promise of communism disintegrated when the Berlin Wall fell in 1989. The promise of capitalism collapsed when Wall Street fell in 2008. The former is now acknowledged by all, the latter by hardly any. We live in the illusion (so Parker Palmer), the deceit (so Walt Brueggemann) that green paper—with “images” printed on it— can save us. Before long capitalism’s empty promise will be evident to all. Needed—also within the churches where Christians too are despairing (without hope) vis-a-vis capitalism’s Humpty-dumpty fall (even while they, and world leaders too, still hope in it)—is a trustworthy promise. Trustworthy promise? Thought you’d never ask!

## **2. The Gospel as God’s promise-pebble dropping into a pool.**

Luther compared God’s promise in Christ to a pebble, a promise-pebble, dropped into the pond of our world. Like all pebbles, it produces a ripple effect that moves out on its own from the very power of the gospel-pebble itself. Luther articulates his notion of mission expansion from this image. It is the energy within the gospel itself which moves out into the world. The ripple-effect shows up in the most surprising places, where mission

executives haven't done any planning at all. E.g., today in the People's Republic of China. Or Ethiopia.

**Relevance:** Instead of "planning" mission programs, Christians are encouraged to see where the ripples are already on the move (possibly in the EECMY today)—and then join in there to "ride the waves."

### **3. Platzregen. The gospel is a moving thundershower.**

In the gospel Platzregen, the Holy "Gust" (sic!) moves the rain cloud of Gospel-promise—as Augsburg Confession 5 says— "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.

**Relevance:** Could help us understand the shrinking numbers in church membership statistics in the USA—even in the US Roman church at last count. At times Luther spoke of the negative side of the Platzregen-image, namely, God moving it away from lands where it bore no fruit. One such example is from 1520.

"I consider that Germany has never before heard so much of God's Word as now. There is no trace of it in history. But if we let it pass by without thanks and honor, I am afraid that we shall have to suffer plague and grimmer darkness. My dear Germans, buy while the mart is at your door; gather in while the sun is shining and the weather good, make use of God's Word of Grace while it is there. For know this, that the Word of God's grace is like a sweeping downpour, which never returns to where it has already been. It has visited the Jews; but it has gone. Now they have nothing. Paul brought it to Greece; from there it has also gone. Now they have the Turks. Rome and the Latin lands have had their visitation; but it has gone. Now they have the Pope. And you Germans must not think that you will have it for ever, for

it will not stay where there is ingratitude and contempt. Therefore, let all take hold and keep hold who can." (*To the Councilors of all German cities, that they should establish and maintain Christian Schools, 1520.*)

Further thoughts on Luther's Pebble and Platzregen as mission metaphors can be found at:  
<<https://crossings.org/thursday/2006/thur033006.shtml>>  
<<https://crossings.org/thursday/2008/thur071008.shtml>>

**4. Froehlicher Wechsel** (joyful exchange—in American slang “a sweet swap”).

This was Luther's metaphor for two passages in St. Paul's writings where the apostle portrays the event of Calvary and Easter as an exchange. In 2 Corinthians 5 our sins get transferred to Christ and Christ's righteousness gets transferred to us. In Galatians 3 it is the sinner's curse and Christ's blessedness that get exchanged.

**Relevance:** At last summer's quadrennial meeting of the International Association for Mission Studies, the international missiological guild, 140 participants from nearly 50 countries gathered in Hungary to discuss the theme “The Gospel of Reconciliation and Human Identity.” The fundamental Biblical text was Paul's classic in 2 Cor. 5. But here the participants parted. Some read the text as blueprint for “the ministry of reconciliation,” the clearly yet-to-be-fulfilled task of intrahuman reconciliation, establishing peace and justice within the human race. Others saw the “ministry of reconciliation” as the unfinished task of getting humankind reconciled to God. For patently even though Christ's saving work is full and complete, vast swathes of humanity are not yet trusting it and thus not yet enjoying it.

Which version of the “ministry of reconciliation” is our

Christian mission agenda for the 21st century? That was the question. Not only among the alleged “experts” at IAMS in Hungary in August 2008, but throughout the worldwide church.

In my contribution to the conversation I offered Luther’s case for mission as the not-yet-finished task of getting sinners reconciled to God, and sought to show its relevance to the chaotic world of the beginning of the 21st century. Its internet location is <https://crossings.org/thursday/2008/thur062608.shtml>

## **5. Deus Absconditus** (God hidden).

At the end of his explanation of the Apostles Creed in the Large Catechism Luther says: “These three articles of the Creed, therefore, separate and distinguish us Christians from all other people on earth. All who are outside this Christian people, whether heathen, Turks, Jews, or false Christians and hypocrites – even though they believe in and worship only the one, true God – nevertheless do not know what his attitude is toward them. They cannot be confident of his love and blessing, and therefore they remain in eternal wrath and damnation. For they do not have the LORD Christ, and, besides, they are not illuminated and blessed by the gifts of the Holy Spirit.” [Book of Concord. Kolb-Wengert, ed., p. 440 (66)]

[German text: “Daruemb scheiden und sondern diese Artikel des Glaubens uns Christen von allen andern Leuten auf Erden. Denn was ausser der Christenheit ist, es seien Heiden, Tuerken, Jueden oder falsche Christen und Heuchler, ob sie gleich nur einen wahrhaftigen Gott glaeuben und anbeten, so wissen sie doch nicht, was [wie] er gegen ihn gesinnet ist, koennen sich auch keiner Liebe noch Guts zu ihm versehen, daruemb sie in ewigen Zorn und Verdammnis bleiben. Denn sie den Herrn Christum nicht haben, dazu mit keinen Gaben durch den heiligen Geist erleuchtet

und begradet sind.”]

**Relevance:** Luther’s concept of deus absconditus, humankind’s common experience of “Godhidden” – in contrast to deus revelatus, “God-revealed-in-Christ” – is a fundamental resource for engaging people of other faiths—both the secular faiths regnant in the West and people of other world religions.

In the citation above Luther expresses one aspect of his “deus absconditus” understanding. All people do encounter God in daily life. Granted, that is a Christian conviction. God is NOT totally hidden from anybody. But what is hidden in humankind’s common experience of God is “what his attitude is toward them.” And thus, Luther concludes, “they cannot be confident of his love and blessing,” which leaves only one alternative, “they remain in eternal wrath and damnation. For they do not have the LORD Christ, and, besides, they are not illuminated and blessed by the gifts of the Holy Spirit.” “Having Christ” is Luther’s other favored expression (other than “fiducia”) for what faith is. Faith is “having Christ.” Which brings to mind Luther’s maxim: “Glaubstu, hastu. Glaubstu nicht, hastu nicht.”

This notion of what humans “have” and “don’t have” when they have only deus absconditus encounters to go on, is absent in today’s mission discussions, so far as I know. It is a unique resource from Luther for Christian mission in today’s manifold “world of faiths” – especially to Muslims. [For more on this see “Using Luther’s Concept of Deus absconditus for Christian Mission to Muslims” on the Crossings website <[www.crossings.org](http://www.crossings.org)>]

Can Luther help us Christ-confessors—not just Lutheran folks, but across the ecumenical spectrum—respond to Christ’s Easter-evening Gospel-imperative “as the Father has sent me, so I send you”?

I think so.

Does Christian mission have any future in our “Apocalypse Now” world in the “sea of faiths” of the 21st century? Well, there is this: We have this promise. God did drop the pebble into this very sea and the ripples are showing up on distant shores. Christ still offers the joyful exchange. The Platzregen is still “platzing” on our planet. In Christ God continues to uncover his hidden face in people’s lives. What are we waiting for?

Edward H. Schroeder  
St. Louis, Missouri, USA  
March 1, 2009

[Augsburg\\_Mis\\_EHS09 \(PDF\)](#)

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## **Pope Benedict XVI**

Colleagues,

The current bishop of Rome stirred things up with his recent attempt to welcome a prodigal son back home. And he elicited response. National Catholic Reporter: “Another example of the danger of treating the lunatic fringe as lost sheep.” Then there was this exchange between Daniel Schorr, 92-year-old anchor on NPR, and Scott Simon—both of them Jewish—on “Weekend Edition.” Scott: “So what might the pope now do?” Dan: “Well, he could simply say what another world leader recently said: ‘I screwed up.’”

Today’s ThTh posting is about this pope, whom some of my RC friends refer to as “B16.” Steve Krueger is back again—after

only a fortnight's rest—with a book review about the “Rule of Benedict” (pun intended). Steve had raved to me earlier about David Gibson's brilliant book. So I asked him to tell all of us what Gibson says. Here it is. As usual, Steve is not just reportorial, but does his own analysis (I insisted) and, of course, puts B16 alongside his fellow German of 500 years ago, Blessed Martin, himself a bit of a pontifex—on the Elbe river in Wittenberg, not the Tiber in Rome. As fellow German, Benedict can read Luther without translation. And he likes Luther. But, Steve asks, does he like the best stuff that came from that bridge-builder on the Elbe?

Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder

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**Review of David Gibson's  
THE RULE OF BENEDICT XVI AND HIS BATTLE WITH THE  
MODERN WORLD.**

**(San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006). 390 pp.,  
\$24.95 US.**

When Karol Wojtyla's name was dropped as a “papabile” (a “pope-able” candidate) at the second conclave of 1978 which ended up electing him, one Italian cardinal shrugged, “Chi é Bottiglia?” (“Who is Bottiglia?”) Wojtyla had been that much a stranger to many of the electors. “Now you know who ‘Bottiglia’ is,” John Paul II would soon tease that prelate as he stepped up to the new pontiff to pay his respects. Indeed, the shadow John Paul II would cast over the next 26 years was larger than life, with little doubt about who the once hardly-known cardinal from Krakow would turn out to be.

John Paul II's successor, the subject of THE RULE OF BENEDICT

XVI AND HIS BATTLE WITH THE MODERN WORLD (hereafter RULE), would not have to emerge from such obscurity. David Gibson, whose vitae includes a stint at Vatican Radio during John Paul II's pontificate alongside documentaries for CNN and numerous articles for most of America's top-flight newspapers and magazines, offers in this book his well-documented assessment of Benedict's message and meaning for our time. To be sure, there seemed little question what the Catholic Church and its world were getting with the election of Joseph Ratzinger in the late Roman afternoon on April 19, 2005:

"The cell phone of an aide to Cardinal Cormac Murphy-O'Conner, who was considered something of a progressive, buzzed with a text message. It was from Sir Stephen Wall, formerly public affairs adviser to the cardinal, and it simply said, 'Shit' (p. 9)...Ratzinger was the most polarizing figure in modern Catholicism and there was no middle ground when it came to opinions on him (p. 11)."

RULE is Gibson's well-rounded attempt to get behind the man whom many had come to know as "God's Rottweiler, Cardinal No, Der Panzerkardinal, the Grand Inquisitor" (p. 6) and whose election was parodied on Italian cell networks. When good Pope John XXIII was elected in 1958, he had spoken to the Roman crowds in extemporaneous Latin and had said, "Hug your children and tell them this hug is from the pope." This time the cell phones were abuzz with the text message, "When you go home, slap your children and tell them this slap is from the pope" (p. 12).

Yet, popular perceptions aside about the man who has claimed the throne of Peter, Gibson's RULE is a major beginning to getting a fix on where Benedict's pontificate will take the church. Gibson feels with his election this pope will not be merely a temporary caretaker. "We are witnessing a struggle for the soul of Catholicism," Gibson says. "That battle has been going on for

decades, but the election...brought the conflict to a head" (p. 17). Thus, "understanding Benedict himself is crucial, because his character, as much as his enormous body of theological writings, will set the tone...and will be the key for forecasting how he will act in whatever time remains to his papacy" (p. 17). RULE is about all those things, which makes this volume an important and valuable resource for anyone interested in Catholicism today who is wondering if Joseph Ratzinger would try to reinvent himself as Benedict XVI. Would he emerge in new ways which would be different, more unifying and more tolerant of the many strands of faith and life which comprise the Roman communion and its world?

To the author, a central and key insight into Benedict is his Augustinian home which often runs counter to the prevailing neo-scholasticism which the pope finds around him and which seems to inform so much of what the new pontiff believes as core truth. "I am a decided Augustinian," Ratzinger has declared, curiously putting him at odds in many ways with even his immediate predecessor whose intellectual home was in Thomism, humanism and personalism (p. 157). This bias to the theology of the 5th century bishop of Hippo and his legacy, according to Gibson, has multiple implications running from Benedict's predilection away from experience to the perfect ideal to his source material for doing theology purely. If you could point to a central theme by which Joseph Ratzinger could always be understood, the grounding in Augustine would be it.

This Augustinian bias is the thread that runs throughout Gibson's eleven chapters which follow, more or less, Ratzinger's chronology from the time of John XXIII and Paul VI to the monumental papacy of John Paul II (Chapters 1 and 2) to the intrigue of the conclave which elected Benedict (Chapters 3 and 4) to the background story of Ratzinger and his Germany from which he emerged (Chapter 5) to the various issues before

catholicism today (Chapters 6 to 11). Gibson's book is enriched by a clear presentation of both history and theological movements and insider peeks into the Vatican's machinations, including some of the inside humor which everybody isn't supposed to repeat but does.

For example, commenting on the difference between John Paul II's loosey-goosey liturgical style which embraced expressions of local culture and included tribal liturgical dance and topless nudity by female lectors (pp. 235-238) and Benedict's far more reserved and pristinely proper liturgical style, the joke was, "What is the difference between a terrorist and a liturgist? Answer: Sometimes you can negotiate with a terrorist" (p. 346). Ratzinger has consistently gone on record, while not directly criticizing the actions of his predecessor's globe-trotting celebrations, preferring Gregorian chant and polyphony that Pius X had mandated a century ago as the only forms suitable for worship distinct from "the cult of the banal" (p. 238). "Outside the liturgical setting, classical music, principally the Germanic geniuses of Bach, Beethoven, and Mozart, represents (for Benedict) the cultural standard proper to a Christian sensibility" (pp. 238-239).

The Augustinian theme, for the author, appears in at least three fundamental ways in Benedict XVI's story. First, it shows up in the way Joseph Ratzinger makes sense out of his youth and the sources of faith to which he was and continues to be drawn. Second, the influence appears to govern the pope's ecclesiology or understanding of the church. Third, the inclination to Augustine appears to shape the pontiff's core belief on the meaning of the gospel and how the gospel serves to offer or withhold God's promise for a broken and estranged humanity. Especially on this third subject, Benedict speaks openly about his regard for Luther, especially the Reformer's "pre-Reformation" writings, as well as other Protestant voices

(especially Barth's). Nevertheless it is questionable that the gospel which Luther understood as the "happy exchange" ever found its way into Ratzinger's core belief (p. 149). As such, it is reasonable to ask of this pope what is so good about his version of "the good news" as he seeks consciously to exalt Christ by his strategy of diminishing the new pope's own role in public appearances and private gatherings (in stark contrast to the personality cult magnified by his predecessor discussed by Gibson in chapter 8 and titled "Pontifex Maximus, Pontifex Minimus").

On the first influence by the writings of Augustine, Joseph Ratzinger is discussed by Gibson as quintessentially German, complete with the author's penetrating analysis of the "Germanic soul" (Chapter 5). Citing Goethe, RULE says, "The Germans...make everything difficult, both for themselves and for everyone else" (p. 119). Gibson argues how the Germanic quest for "authenticity" and certainty of belief and the sense of betrayal when those beliefs are challenged impacted the young Ratzinger growing up in Bavaria during the tragic epoch of National Socialism. Complete with a historical walk through Germanic history since the first Arian Christians influenced the German tribes, Gibson tries to show how a young, shy boy, always last to be picked for sports contests, found his sense of self in the life of the mind. Born in 1927, Joseph Aloysius Ratzinger was the son of a Bavarian policeman, already in his 50s when the boy was born. The father was a strict disciplinarian who valued an orderly life and for whom the word "no" came easily. Many years later, Ratzinger would reflect, "I always remember, with great affection, the goodness of my father and mother. And for me goodness also means the ability to say, 'no,' because goodness that lets anything go can't be good for another" (p. 128).

At a later time that "no" would become a familiar rejoinder for many teachers and theologians experimenting with new ideas when

Ratzinger took the reins of the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. Similarly, in Gibson's analysis, the studious Ratzinger found the intellectual order he sought in patristics, particularly in studying Augustine (Augustine would become the subject of his first doctoral dissertation), because it gave to the young scholar the perfect Platonic ideal that made sense out of the worldly chaos swirling around him during the war years. "What the Nazi experience seems to have bred in Joseph...was a kind of distancing, a pattern of removing himself from unpleasantness, isolating the pure ideal-of the faith, the church, the family, the nation-from the inevitable corruptions of the world" (p. 137). Gibson adds, "This approach fosters a sense of remoteness in his remembrances, a detachment that may strike many as cold" (p. 137).

Years later, it would be noted that Benedict XVI would characteristically avoid associations that would implicate his world in the terrible chapters of Germany's history vis-à-vis the Jews and others. "One gets the impression that the Third Reich has meaning for Ratzinger today...as an object lesson about church and culture, and only the details consistent with that argument have passed through the filter of his memory...Ratzinger tends to focus on the failings of individuals rather than on perceived defects in the national character" (p. 139). The implication is that Ratzinger continues to live in the isolated and purist world of the Augustinian ideal.

The second influence by the Augustinian bias shows up in the development of Joseph Ratzinger's ecclesiology, that is, his doctrine of the church. The central question is, "Is there a place in the church for the messy, sordid business of sinners and their sins?"

As Joseph Ratzinger was moving through the formative ranks in Germany and was beginning to establish himself as a formidable

Catholic thinker in touch with all the new waves of scholarship, he caught the eye of another young Swiss theologian who had become dean of the Catholic theological faculty at Tübingen, Hans Küng. Küng was able to entice the Bavarian “wunderkind” to join him at the flagship university, while both at the same time served as “periti” (a “peritus” is an “expert”) to the Council that had been called and became known as Vatican II. As the Council unfolded over four sessions from 1962-1965, two camps of reformers emerged almost in increasingly bitter opposition to each other.

The first group, favored by Ratzinger, saw reform as “ressourcement,” that is, a return to the early sources of the faith meant to be faithfully replicated for the renewal of a corrupted modernity (going “backward into the future,” p. 164). The second group, favored by Küng and a host of other luminaries (e.g., Karl Rahner), tended to enlist the neo-scholastic perspective and favored “aggiornamento,” a jettisoning of the past and opening to modernity’s future. By the fourth session, with the “aggiornamento” group clearly in control, Ratzinger’s enthusiasm for the Council became dampened and his disposition “dark” (p. 166). Ratzinger’s critique was the growing conviction that the Council Fathers were being “taken in by an ‘over-optimism’” about modernity (p. 165), concluding “that the strong sense, deriving from Luther, on the theme of sin, was alien to the mainly French authors of the schema (that produced “Gaudium et Spes,” the Council’s document on the church in the modern world adopted in the final session),” p. 166. Ratzinger went even so far as to criticize “Gaudium et Spes” as “downright Pelagian,” a criticism which would recall similar critiques by both St. Augustine and Martin Luther in their respective times.

The issue would recur time and again as Ratzinger later rose to become Archbishop of Munich in 1977, receiving his cardinal’s biretta from Pope Paul VI in 1978. Gibson tracks out how, as his

power and influence increased, Ratzinger would press his views of a purer church in a corrupted modern world toward his co-reformers of Vatican II. The long list of those whom Cardinal Ratzinger would “correct” began with his scathing critique of his old colleague, Küng, whose acclaimed *ON BEING A CHRISTIAN* was blasted by Ratzinger. Worse yet, Ratzinger, about whom Küng said “he felt stabbed in the back,” was instrumental in collaborating in Rome’s eventual condemnation of Küng’s work in 1979 (all without a formal hearing), p. 177. In 1981, John Paul II asked Cardinal Ratzinger to take over the Sacred Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith and, in Ratzinger’s own words, the rubric would be, “The Christian believer is a simple person; bishops should protect the faith of these little people against the power of intellectuals” (p. 185).

From Marxist Liberation theology to a host of other perceived assaults, just what was it about the nature of the church for Benedict that needed protecting? Gibson’s diagnosis includes the pope’s understanding of a church which reflected the perfect loving Christ. In Benedict’s inaugural encyclical, “*Deus Caritas Est*” (“God is love”), according to Gibson, “Benedict’s thinking follows on the Augustinian view that the church is ‘the moon that does not shine with its own light, but reflects the light of Christ the sun.’ Thus in Benedict’s Platonic cosmos, Christ is the ideal, and the church is the image of that ideal. From that perspective, one cannot change something in the reflection without distorting the original image, in this case Christ, who is God” (p. 362). The author wonders, however, “This near-total equivalency between Christ and the church—the Catholic Church, in Benedict’s view, being the church par excellence—is, for one thing, a theological stretch” (p. 363). What makes it a stretch especially is its challenge concerning who, in fact, Christ would be for sinners? A foe or a friend? Do sinners have a place in the church or is the church a de facto “invisible” one of a

Platonic ideal (a notion roundly criticized ironically by Melanchthon in articles VII and VIII of the Apology of the Augsburg Confession)?

The question raises the third Augustinian issue, that of christology and the doctrine of salvation which surrounds Christ. What kind of gospel is Benedict, in fact, prepared to proclaim to the world of modernity? It is interesting that while Benedict appears willing to share Lutheran anti-Pelagian concerns first fleshed out by Augustine in the doctrine of original sin, stressing the gracious giftedness of faith (and critiquing any effort of the human will to save itself), for Benedict faith seems to center around the pristine church itself represented most purely by its bishops. "In subsequent talks (talks following "Deus Caritas Est"), Benedict made more explicit than ever his belief that the true Church is most perfectly represented by the Catholic bishops, who preserve and pronounce the truth of Christ because they are to be considered 'the privileged place of the action and transmission of the Holy Spirit'...Through apostolic succession, Christ comes to us: He speaks to us in the word of the apostles and their successors; he acts in the sacraments through their hands; our gaze is enveloped in his gaze and makes us feel loved, received into God's heart" (p. 363).

On belief Benedict adds, "No one believes purely on his own. We always believe in and with the Church...We must, in a manner of speaking, let ourselves fall into the communion of the faith, of the Church. Believing is, in itself, a Catholic act: it is a participation in this great certitude that is present in the living subject of the Church" (p. 363). To Benedict it would seem, the church and Christ are virtually one and the same. Yet, the question remains, while the church is, indeed, described as "the Body of Christ," is the Christ of the church of any use for human sinners and their sins?

One would hope that such a Christ would be that Christ who takes what we all deserve under judgment as his own and gifts to us what he alone deserves for our own, the promising message of Luther's gospel about the "happy exchange." But "gospel" for Benedict seems to mean something else. Benedict has gone on record as suspicious of the very term "good news" or "Froh-Botschaft" which he sees as modernity's curved-in term for self-affirmation. "There are quite dramatic words of judgment in the Gospel that can really make one shudder," the pope points out. "We really ought not to stifle them. The Lord himself in the Gospel obviously sees no contradiction between the message of judgment and the good news" (p. 321). For Augustine, the gospel was the message of God's love without the New Testament questions about the meaning of the cross. The bishop of Hippo was working on other things. The medievals, on the other hand, took up the subject of the cross all over again and it became the main thing for that theologian of the cross named Luther. Though Benedict claims to be a fan, it is a side of Luther that seems to have eluded Benedict entirely.

David Gibson's *RULE* opens a vast array of perspectives with which to evaluate Benedict XVI. It is a superb, even-handed and not especially encouraging evaluation to this key shaper of the realities today of over a billion brothers and sisters in the Lord in the Roman communion. Updated and revised in 2007, the book is already out of date with more recent events, such as the papal visit to the USA in April of 2008. Hopefully, the author will keep us abreast with revisions as the pontificate of Joseph Ratzinger unfolds. *THE RULE OF BENEDICT* lives up to the cover's praise by "America," "This extraordinarily well-written, informative, insightful, and page-turning (yes, it is a page-turner) book provides Gibson's picture of a modern man leading a modern church who clearly views engagement with the modern world as a dead end."

This incredible book provides our welcome, like it or not, to the alternate world of Joseph Ratzinger.

Pastor Stephen C. Krueger

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# A Cake for Seminex's 35th Birthday

Colleagues,

Thirty-five years ago today, February 19, 1974, Seminex was born in St. Louis. [That date is also my brother Ted's birthday. He was there too. We celebrate the two birthdays together ever since.] That "time for confessing" in Missouri, so says Bob Bertram in his book by that name, which led to an exile-seminary, was really about the Gospel, the unadulterated Gospel—with no add-ons. "So that," as the ancient collect reads: "Thy Word, as becometh it, may not be bound but have free course and be preached to the joy and edifying of Christ's holy people." Couple months after its birth—May 23, 1974—Seminex offered its first graduating class to the church, and shortly thereafter Ron Neustadt became the first Seminex grad to be ordained in St. Louis—yes, in a Missouri Synod congregation! No surprise, the TV folks were there. Ron made the evening news.

During those same 35 years now, Ron's been proclaiming that unadulterated Gospel—and also mentoring others to do the same. Case in point is Brian Days, currently in the SAM program [synodically authorized minister] in the Central/Southern Illinois Synod of the ELCA, the same synod where Ron serves.

A few days ago Brian, earlier a student in a Lutheran Confessions course team-taught by Ron and me, asked me for some pointers on the Transfiguration gospel coming up this next Sunday. I punted him over to his neighbor pastor Ron. Below is the exchange that took place between them. It's a gem. A virtual birthday cake for this anniversary day. Taste and see.

Peace and Joy!  
Ed Schroeder

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Date: Thursday, February 12, 2009, 3:08 PM

Pastor Ron. Good to be in touch. As Ed has said I was having a little trouble finding a way to go with Transfiguration Sunday. I think I may go with "this is my beloved, listen to Him" and build off that.

I would love any help or instruction you have.

In Christ,  
Brian Days

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From: Ron Neustadt

Date: Friday, February 13, 2009, 10:12 AM

Dear Brian,

I'm happy to offer what I can. I imagine we will be involved in an e-mail exchange beyond this one as we discuss this text.

The first question is "What does the text say?" What is Mark's message in this text? Why does Mark include it where he does in his Gospel? What's the significance of Moses and Elijah? The voice? The "metamorphosis" itself? (Metamorphosis is Mark's

Greek word that gets translated “transfigured.”)

Related to that, why would this account be important for Mark’s first readers? That may tell us why it is (still) important for us. What was going on in the life of the church when Mark wrote this?

These are questions you have probably already wrestled with in your text study. The sermon, of course, will not be a lecture on the answers to these questions, but the answers to these questions will help shape the sermon.

Once that preparation is done, we can start cooking. Remember the “Crossings” matrix, our “recipe.” (The purpose of the Crossings model is to help us “cross” the Word of God with real, everyday life, you recall. So, the idea is to identify the real life “bad situation” we find ourselves in that God addresses (in this text and its context) with Good News– and to make sure that we don’t stop too early in identifying that bad situation – because the Good News of Jesus (and that Good News alone) can cross out the very worst of bad situations in which we find ourselves – the critique of God.

So, first, what problem of ours does this passage (and its context) address? One way to answer that is to ask who in the text has a problem? And how is his/her/their problem like a problem that we have? We can start with a problem that is obvious, right on the surface, some kind of behavior perhaps.

Then we ask “What’s going on inside that has caused this problem that we can so easily observe?”

And ultimately we ask, “What does God have to say about this problem of ours? What is God’s critique (judgment)?”

Then we are prepared to hear the Good News God has for us. How

does Jesus' death and resurrection cross out God's critique?  
That's the Gospel!

And what difference does that make for us "inside?"

And, finally, how does that change in us exhibit itself in observable, changed behavior?

Here's one possible way of doing all that with Mark's transfiguration account:

Mark begins, "Six days later..." Six days after what? After Jesus began to teach the disciples "that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected . . ." and Peter objected. And Jesus rebuked Peter. Even called him Satan!

Six days after that, Jesus takes Peter, James and John up a high mountain. (Mountains were always significant in the Bible. Moses had gone up a mountain to receive the 10 commandments. Elijah, the most prominent prophet in the OT, had held that contest with the prophets of Baal on Mt. Carmel. Mountains are where God had revealed himself.)

And, sure enough, Moses and Elijah, those representatives of the Law and the Prophets, show up!

And that's when Peter speaks up and demonstrates his problem. (Remember Peter seems always to be the first one to speak up. He's a kind of spokesman for all the disciples – maybe even us, too!)

And his problem is that he still is objecting to what Jesus had just said (six days earlier) he had come to do. He was objecting to Jesus going to Jerusalem to be handed over . . . He was objecting to Jesus' willingness to suffer and even die at the hands of those who claimed that Jesus's offering of forgiveness of sins to people violated the Law and the Prophets – and God's

own righteousness.

Might this be a problem that we share with Peter? ! Willing to enjoy Jesus' company, even being religious and building "dwelling places" for him, but sometimes unwilling to forgive, to be merciful? (You will have to know your hearers to know how this problem gets expressed in their lives.)

Peter seemed to think that Jesus was like another Moses or Elijah – someone who tells us, or even shows us, how we should live. But Jesus is NOT on a par with Moses & Elijah. He is more than lawgiver or prophet.

Peter's seemingly generous offer (to build dwellings) reveals the sin in him: not trusting Jesus' offer of forgiveness and mercy, an offer he was willing to make at the cost of his life.

God's critique of that sin (not trusting) had gotten expressed six days earlier: "Get away from me, Satan." When we put ourselves under that critique, that's a problem bigger than we can solve on our own.

That's why Jesus is so good. In fact, that's why God is so good in sending his Son. Remember what the voice said after Moses and Elijah were no longer there, and it was Jesus Only? : THIS IS MY SON, THE BELOVED; LISTEN TO HIM. Listen to him. Listen to what? Listen to what he has been telling you about his going to Jerusalem. About his suffering and dying. Because it's FOR YOU! It's because you are that dear to Me.

That's a message that can actually create trust in us (again and again) – hearing God tell us how loved we are.

And when we do trust it, we actually act on it. That is, we find ourselves showing mercy to others, forgiving them – all for the joy of it! We find ourselves "coming down the mountain" (maybe

your church has a little “mountain” a few steps high, where communicants come to receive the Body and Blood of Jesus). We find ourselves coming down from that mountain eager to do what Jesus did when he came down from the Mount of Transfiguration. We find ourselves willing to live our lives in service to others – showing mercy, forgiving, telling them the Good News of Him who did not even turn away from the cross because he loves us so much.

That’s pretty quick and sketchy, but I hope that helps, Brian.

Peace & Joy,  
Pr. Neustadt

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From: brian days Date: Saturday, February 14, 2009, 11:08 AM

It was a big help. I am going to focus on the “Listen” part. I didn’t see it til you wrote it, the part about Peter still refusing to believe Jesus should go to the cross. It was an eye-opening angle. When I finish the sermon I will forward a copy.

Thanks for the help and God Bless,  
Brian

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From: Ron Neustadt Date: Saturday, February 14, 2009, 3:31 PM

You’re welcome. Blessings on your preaching.

Pr. Neustadt

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The Sermon.

“Listen” Sermon for Feb 22

Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Have you ever had a mountaintop experience? A weekend, a day or even minutes that left you feeling like you were in the presence of God? I had one a few years ago. I attended a seminary sampler weekend at the Chicago School of Theology. It was a time to meet new people from a wide variety of diverse cultures and backgrounds who all were thinking of entering seminary or who were already enrolled and in different stages of their journey. It was a blast. I wanted to move up there and stay... but on Monday, I had to drive back home. I had to walk back down the mountain.

In the Gospel reading today we read that Jesus took Peter, James and John and led them apart by themselves up a mountain. The only words spoken on the mountain according to Mark's gospel are by God and Peter.

In the company of Moses who represents the law he has grown up with, Elijah the prophet, and his friend and LORD Jesus, Peter thinks this is a pretty good place to be. Peter is terrified but has not forgotten what Jesus told him about His impending suffering and death. So to keep Jesus here would be a good thing.

Then a cloud overshadows them and God's voice is heard, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!" When Peter looks up Moses and Elijah are gone and Jesus stands alone. As they come down the mountain Jesus tells them to keep quiet about what they have seen.

It was a short-lived mountaintop experience for Peter. In the presence of God one moment and then walking back into the darkness of this world the next. We often share this feeling. Our good times don't last long enough. Daily struggles with money, people, time, illness, injury and life in general can

stop our good mood in a hurry. It is at these low points we sometimes quit listening to Jesus and try to do things on our own.

Millions of people are looking for answers. They seek them in self-help books and TV shows. They seek happiness and security in the latest fad. They look for acceptance in their appearance and possessions. For all their hard work and labor they are left with nothing if they do not know the saving grace of Jesus Christ.

Jesus walked off that mountain knowing He was walking toward a certain death. He marched toward the cross ready and willing to pay for the sins of those who came before us, ourselves, and all those who will come after us. He died for the sins of all. His grace is sufficient.

While at the seminary sampler I spoke of earlier, I met a young woman by the name of Laura Forbes. She had been a missionary for the past few years and was about to enter seminary. She didn't know what God had in store for her but she was going in the direction God was asking to go. While the two of us ate breakfast I asked her how she got into mission work. She said she felt a call that way but always made excuses. But then while she was talking with her pastor and making the same old excuses, he asked her what nets are you holding onto? What do you mean? she asked back. He said something then that not only touched her but also me to this day. "Why don't you drop your nets and go?" Soon after she was on her way to Central America to do mission work.

The same Jesus that called Peter and Andrew, the same Jesus that called James and John, the same Jesus we read about in our gospel lesson today, calls to us everyday. His way is better than any new fad. His comfort is bigger than any fear. His love

for us is greater than anything this world can set in front of us. He calls to us here in this church and He calls to every last neighbor near and far outside this church. He says follow me. Jesus doesn't guarantee that when we follow we will have an everlasting mountaintop experience. We will have our ups and downs that life deals us. But we will share the joys and pains with the One who calls us.

Now I am going to ask you all to close your eyes and picture yourself by a beach. It's a bright sunny day. You are in a boat not far from the shore. The water is clear and there is a warm breeze hitting your face. About to cast your fishing net overboard, you hear a call from the shoreline. It is Jesus calling you to follow. Now picture yourself at work or the classroom. At home in front of the TV. At the store. In the car. Jesus calls to us wherever we are. Will you drop your nets and go? Will you listen?

May the grace and mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ that goes far beyond our human understanding be in our hearts and minds forever. Amen.

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## **Jesus in the New Testament: Just How Real is He?**

Colleagues,

In this week's ThTh offering, Crossings colleague Steve Krueger reviews a book by Ernest Werner. Ernest and I were together as students at Concordia Seminary in the early 1950s. I helped him get into trouble by publishing his article "Orthodoxy Against

Itself" in the SEMINARIAN, our student theological journal at the sem. It was the last issue of the school year (June 1954), the end of my own last year at the sem. Dick Baepler and I were co-editors.

I don't remember what all happened to Ernie in the aftermath, for I was graduated and gone, and Ernest still had some semesters to go. For Missouri-insiders, this will suffice: he got on the hit-list of fellow-students Herman Otten and Kurt Marquart, his classmates. They outed him to the synod's president John Behnken. And thus, as his daughter told me in her letter accompanying the book, "daddy was ordained elsewhere." In subsequent years we lost track of each other. Until last year when his daughter Lois sent me his book for review.

I asked Steve Krueger—himself an LCMS pastor with scars—to do it. A fair number of his earlier reviews are in the ThTh archives on the website. He persistently goes for the jugular in every review. Steve agreed again and has handed in this empathic and probing review. Even if you have no antenna for signals from those ancient Wars of Missouri, Steve expands the agenda to speak to folks like us today—some (many?) of whom might wonder—every now and then—if that Jesus Seminar crowd might just be right. You'll get the message.

Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder

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**A Review of Ernest Werner's ROD OF JESSE.  
(Trumansburg, NY: Dwarf Lion Press, 2008).  
338 pages, \$14.95 US.**

Helmut Thielicke somewhere compares the Word of God to a little girl standing in front of a mirror. She notices the compelling

figure standing before her. The girl stares for a time and then raises her right arm and sees the figure reflect the very same movement. She raises her left arm and the figure does the same. She jumps up and down and the figure before her mimics the same movement until, in an exciting moment of self-conscious discovery, the little girl exclaims, "That's me!" From that moment the child will never be the same. How do you explain or prove such a breakthrough? You really can't. Its truth is self-authenticating. So it is, says Thielicke, with how the Word of God establishes itself in the believing community. You hear the bible's stories about creation and fall, wilderness wandering, conquest, exile and restoration, cross and resurrection, until suddenly, as if before a mirror, you say, "Aha! That's about me! I am Adam. I am Eve. I am faithless Israel. I am Paul the persecutor, Peter the denier, the divinely estranged one in need of redemption and fed by the Word's promise which has as its center Jesus the Christ." Proofs for such a thing only ultimately reside in what faith suddenly sees, nurtured in the believing, confessing community, with faith's gospel or kerygma, as Werner Elert puts it, the "punctum mathematicum," the self-authenticating point, beyond which one cannot go without losing everything.

Paul Tillich says the same as he discusses the "theological circle." Outside that circle, as faith intuits the kerygma's truth, you can have historical figures, events, experiences which may be approached by modernism's various scientific quests but what faith sees within the circle evaporates into unknowable mist beyond that circle's boundary. Tillich stood in the legacy of St. Anselm whose "credo ut intelligam" ("I believe that I may understand") echoed the same and Anselm's maxim similarly restated Augustine's "crede, ut intelligas" ("believe, so that you may understand"). Or, as Luther would have it, "Wie glaubst du, so hast du." Finally in the end, "as you believe, so you

have.”

Since the Enlightenment, however, other approaches to scripture, those from “outside the circle,” have been tried. Could the new science of the enlightened mind establish historic faith? What was once taken as objectively true “out there” in an earlier time because unquestioned authority said so, was now seen as having collapsed as the subjective mind began to be thought by Enlightenment sophisticates to organize reality. Luther is even listed by some to be among the early post-medieval culprits, who had such a high regard for subjective faith that it could create both God and an idol and thus construct and organize reality. For Luther, of course, faith’s grasp was on the reliable Word and the Reformer never left the theological circle.

Yet, students of the Reformation’s influence and of Luther’s thinking, like atheistic Feuerbach, were quick to notice how the claim to faith, that it “made both God and an idol,” could just as easily be seen as constructing a fiction for the alienated human personality. Thus entered onto the scene of scientific modernism new quests to establish what might be reliably known to the modern, scientific mind. If the Gospels, like the rest of Scripture, could be studied with modernism’s critical, scientific, historic assumptions, was there any claim which faith had apprehended and believed that could stand? The most urgent quest which emerged was the one for the historic Jesus, the ultimate object of the Christian faith. Could something of a historic Jesus be known scientifically to satisfy the demands of the modern, scientific mind if the theological circle could no longer stand the scrutiny of modernity?

When I entered Concordia Seminary, St. Louis in 1971 from the Missouri Synod’s feeder system, that quest, with its attendant names like Strauss, Schweitzer and then later, Bultmann, had been generally relegated to the trash heap of history, worth

noting as a footnote and having reached generally a dead end after over two centuries of searching. Newer, better waves of scholarship, less enamored with Continental Liberalism and its links with modern historicism, had grown attentive again, especially with Barth's new approach, to listening to scripture as proclamation in the pilgrimage of the historic community of faith. Were those scriptures historically mediated? Yes, of course. The New Testament especially, including the Gospels, were rich in the meanings and the symbols of Jewish apocalyptic, given the reality of the destruction of the Temple, with the scriptures being presented as proclamatory documents of faith to speak to those times in their context. Yet, if you wanted to know about Jesus, you would have to look at how he was being believed. To try to extract a Jesus from outside that circle of faith, was to move to a bankrupt place without meaning. It was asserted once again that Jesus and faith could never really be separated. During my seminary era, despite Missouri's battles of the time, the fact was that modernism was treated as yesterday's news by most of us.

Yet, apparently, at that same Concordia Seminary of an earlier era that had not always been so. A generation before, McCarthy-era right-wing ideologues apparently still got mileage out of finding modernist heretics everywhere, including among their classmates, ready to pounce on the unsuspecting faithful with modernist doubt about biblical myths and legends. One of those targets became the author of ROD OF JESSE, Rev. Ernest Werner, whose seminary preparation for ministry was interrupted when he was turned in and removed from Concordia's student body. Rev. Werner's journey took him to another body of Lutheranism and eventually into the Unitarian Church tradition.

ROD OF JESSE is Werner's recent self-published book, the obvious result of many years of reflection on the question of the historic Jesus and what, if anything, can reliably known about

the one called the Christ. Self-published materials are, in and of themselves, already mildly curious, even in an age of desktop publishing. They can be, like the unfiltered internet, about anything and of any quality, not having been tested and refined by the publication process involving publishers and editors. They can range from the tracts and books the fellow in the soiled overcoat passes out on the subway to save your soul to the elegant JESUS AND THE NEW AGE commentary by F. Danker on the Gospel of Luke. In my opinion, some of the flaws in ROD OF JESSE can be attributed to the lack of a formal editorial hand, making the book difficult to recommend to contemporary readers.

The work immediately immerses its reader in a world of the modernist quest for the historic Jesus without explaining why the search ought to matter in this post-modernist day and age. It is as if a conversation is being picked up from a half-century ago, perhaps one which might have been heard in seminary dorm bull sessions between fundamentalists and modernists, and then transposed into this day and time with little regard for the waves of biblical scholarship and insights which have transpired over at least two generations. Authoritative names such as Käsemann, Conzelmann, Dieter-Betz (any serious exegete after Bultmann, actually) are simply conspicuous by their absence. This serious lapse is compounded by a stream of consciousness style of anecdotal writing leaving its reader bouncing around from the earliest questers for the historic Jesus like Erskine and Dupuis, Schweitzer and Bultmann to the bizarre theories of a John Allegro and his book THE SACRED MUSHROOM AND THE CROSS, from which the author's somewhat vague label of "Negative Critics" emerges. It is apparently these voices the author sets up as his debating partner as he asks if the Jesus of the Gospels is real and, if so, how? Forty or so pages into the book, the author lets his reader glimpse why any of this should matter :

*"In the Altoona [Pennsylvania] Public Library, which was then housed in a mere wing upstairs of one of the public schools, I discovered THE QUEST OF THE HISTORICAL JESUS as a young pastor in that Pennsylvania railroad town. Although Schweitzer had barely figured in our classes at Concordia Seminary, I read his autobiography there, OUT OF MY LIFE AND THOUGHT, which was published in an attractive 35-cent Mentor book, and now I was drawn to the QUEST. Clearly, the English title of this book reminds us of the common phrase, 'going in Quest of,' so that this contraband of the higher criticism is being smuggled under the flag of a skillful literary allusion to a Grail Quest. In England theology is a timid affair where literary people and a few philosophers have done their thinking for them, but who invented this skillful title? It was FC Burkitt, an excellent scholar, who saw the value of this book, but I think we owe this title to the translator. A plain German sentence early on Mr. W. Montgomery, BD, translated as follows: "This dogma (namely, of the unity of the two natures of Christ, God and man) – this dogma had first to be shattered before men could once more go out in quest of the historical Jesus.*

*"What a suggestion of pilgrimage! What an invitation to pilgrimage, whereas in German Schweitzer had written 'ehe man den historische Jesus wieder suchen konnte.' His words are very plain. The idea is not that of MEN setting out on a Quest for the Holy Grail of solid fact, but only of one's looking for the Jesus of history after a shattering of dogma, which means a collapse in the very supports of belief (p. 44)."*

The passage is a good sampling of the author's writing style and of his rationale. What the author never answers is why this ought to matter to the rest of us for whom the quest had been long ago disposed of as futile. A good editor of a recognized publishing house might have asked, "Could you possibly be

answering questions no one is seriously asking any longer?" While recognizing that ROD OF JESSE may be the culmination of a mind's life's work (thus, genuinely desiring to honor it as such), I find it difficult to see who its intended audience is, especially as post-modernism has now seemingly supplanted skeptical modernism as dogma. The very spirituality modernism critiques now defines the contemporary "zeitgeist."

Parts Two through Six of the book represent a somewhat uneven but interesting walk through the various synoptic pericopes along with the Fourth Evangelist. The author works out of the standard priorities of most of us trained since the 1960s with Mark's priority fairly well established along with Q as source for Matthew and Luke. That journey is arguably worth the price of admission (\$14.95) because each of the pericopes is thoughtfully considered from the perspective of the modernist skeptic.

His would be but one voice sitting around the table in the weekly ecumenical pericope study of local clergy, replicated hundreds of times over every week in most any community today. My voice would be respectful but certainly different, as I would point out how the various texts play out within the theological circle of the believing community of faith and the author probably wouldn't (although, he too, wonders and acknowledges how the Gospels' words elicit faith).

Back in seminary days, Frank Beare's THE EARLIEST RECORD OF JESUS functioned much for us in the same way, methodically looking at each pericope through the lens of the synoptic tradition and speculating on why each Evangelist enlists the sources to paint his portrait of Jesus. Extended discussions by Rev. Werner on demons and the Messianic secret used by Mark are interesting and helpful but certainly neither new nor fresh and frankly dated.

The great themes of the post-Bultmannians such as Käsemann, that apocalyptic is the mother of New Testament theology linked to the great event of the destruction of the Temple, are missing in action in the author's treatment. One wonders if one of the problems with ROD OF JESSE is that its Unitarian author spent too little time with his Trinitarian counterparts over the past decades and may not have realized that what he undoubtedly thinks as eyebrow-raising isn't anymore. Most of us had similarly dealt with Bultmann, Wrede and the host of higher critical issues long ago, too. Yet, while he surely has a place at the table along with everyone else nowadays, that he ought to have gathered his thoughts in a book remains the question I would ask.

Well, that's not entirely true, either. There is the element of the bizarre one is not likely to get elsewhere. This is especially true in the protracted section which discusses the raising of Lazarus as an "archetype" of phallic deity (Part Four, pp. 181-217). If such a claim intrigues the reader, how the cult of Osiris may have informed the resurrection of Lazarus account, this is the book for you.

The author concludes with a considered claim that modernism's quest (the Negative Critics) really does lead to a dead end. Using modernism's assumption, there is nothing reliably that can be known about the Jesus of the Gospels.

For a modern interpreter it is almost a duty to try to extract a 'historical Jesus' from his myth and present him as a winsome human being, a man of kindly impulse spreading encouragements, bolstering faith, and filled with insights-Hebrew insights. It cannot be done...The man is out of sight. A sort of rumor has replaced him (p. 321).

Indeed. Yet, had that been the point all along? The author seems

to say so. To him, faith creates the myth of the Gospels in which resides the persistent, perhaps even compelling rumor around which a community continues to gather. To be sure, with the author, it is a rumor obscured through the controlling of ecclesial power, but a dangerous rumor nonetheless to change people's lives.

It is this rumor that a better book could have been about. What would rehabilitate this book is a major rewrite, under the scrutiny of an editor who knows how to organize and write, and that is in touch with the past 30 years of biblical scholarship. There the rumor is revisited, often with the canonical believing community in mind, and noting the persistence of faith.

Pastor Stephen C. Krueger

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## **“The earth showeth His handiwork.” In a human hand?**

Colleagues,

This may sound like a shaggy dog story, but don't give up. There's gold at the end of the tale.

Richard Parsons (M.D.) and wife Rosalie (R.N.) enrolled in one of the earliest Crossings semester-long courses we offered. Must have been in the 1980s. Its title was “Bringing God's Peace to Earth.” The Grounding text was Luke's Christmas Story. The 6-step Crossings paradigm for that text then already was the one you saw here six Thursdays ago on Christmas Day: “Night, Fear, Lost,” and then “Savior, Joy, Glorifying.”

See [www.crossings.org/thursday/2008/thur122508.shtml](http://www.crossings.org/thursday/2008/thur122508.shtml) for details.

Sitting around the table with Dick and Rosalie and the rest of us in that basement classroom at St. Mark's Lutheran Church were Gloria Lohrmann, nuclear-freeze leader in St. Louis, and next to her Larry Lemke, head-honcho at McDonnell-Douglas Aircraft for their F-15 (or was it F-18?) fighter project—both very smart (natch!), both articulate. You can imagine some of the conversation that ensued as we all sought to link Luke's "peace on earth" with Gloria's and Larry's daily work—as well as with the daily work all the rest of us were doing.

To fill out the cast of characters for what follows I need to add the name of Charles Austerberry, Ph.D. student in microbiology at Washington University, who soon thereafter got involved in Crossings ventures here in town.

Back to the Parsons. Not too many years later Dick became our doctor, when one of the family needed help from his field of medical expertise. I'll give you a hint as to what that speciality was. Dick was part of the team that brought the first lithotripter [look it up] to St. Louis hospitals.

During the days of his caring for us I once asked him if modern medical technology had yet come up with a humanly-crafted sphincter [second clue, look it up]. His answer: "Only God can make a sphincter."

Fast forward to January 2009. Gloria Lohrmann and Charles Austerberry married back in 1985. Their son is now a freshman at St. Louis University here in town. Chuck is now a seasoned microbiology prof at Creighton University in Omaha, Nebraska. He's an activist in the public discussions about Darwin and Christian theology. He sent me a note when I once hyped Michael Behe—Roman Catholic microbiologist (Lehigh University)—in a book

review I did of his "Darwin's Black Box. The Biochemical Challenge to Evolution." "Not so fast, Ed," Chuck said, "Behe's not got it quite right."

The conversation has continued.

Chuck drove his son back to St. Louis University last month after the Christmas break. After depositing him at the dorm, Chuck spent an overnite with us. The conversation continued. Just to keep me au courant he left some articles for me to read when he headed back to Omaha. Not exactly pabulum: Intelligent Design or Intelligible Design? Kenotic Trinitarian Panentheism. Chiasmic Cosmology and Atonement. God's Use of Chance. And a couple of articles on the pro- and con- debate continuing with Behe. As if I didn't have enough stuff piled around to keep me busy.

Renewed conversation with Chuck—great fun!—resurrected Dick Parson's bon mot from long ago about sphincters. [Whether that memory maneuver in my head signals intelligent design, intelligible design or God's use of chance, I cannot tell.] After which came this thought: Why not ask Dick to write something on the topic—maybe even start out with that sphincter quote?

Dick and Rosalie are now retired from their professional callings, but he keeps his hand in theology and all sorts of other stuff. So does Rosalie.

So I did ask him to say more about that sphincter sentence. Below you have what he sent me. Forget sphincter. Think about a bowl of oatmeal!

Peace and Joy!  
Ed Schroeder

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## A BOWL OF OATMEAL

Rosalie and I attend concerts of the St. Louis Symphony on certain Friday mornings. This past Friday Emmanuel Ax playing the piano was a treat for us. As I sat there watching and listening to his music, I was astounded by how rapidly and accurately he is able to hit the proper keys at the right time.

Just think of all the electrical impulses generated by his ears listening to the rest of the orchestra and impulses generated by his eyes as he looks at the keyboard and peripherally sees the conductor with his baton! And even more, how those impulses are electrically generated by sophisticated chemical reactions from chemicals synthesized by special cells he has grown in this body.

If that isn't enough, think for a moment about how some chemicals and cells in his brain have the ability to regenerate pathways previously learned (memory), then reenergize the nerves and muscles required to have his fingers to again push the proper keys with the proper force at the proper time to produce (again) the right sounds.

It gets more complicated. Think for a moment how the body is able to determine what is the proper amount of various hormones in this creature. Let's take thyroid hormone as one example. How does the body produce some special cells to monitor the proper level of thyroid hormone (TH)? Then how is this information transmitted to the pituitary gland located at the base of the brain? After this, how is it that certain cells in the pituitary produce thyroid stimulating hormone (TSH) which then affects the thyroid gland in your neck to produce TH in the proper amounts for the general good health of almost all the cells of the body? (For instance, if not enough TH, his mind and muscles would be

slowed).

**AND ALL THIS WORK CAN BE DONE BECAUSE MR. AX ATE A LOWLY BOWL OF OATMEAL (FOOD).**

I believe this small example is so complicated that intelligent creation must be considered. I think that Darwin has some explanations that account for some adaptations seen in plants and animals; however it would take a very long time for “accidents” (mutations which survive) for such complexity to all come together across many species.

Yesterday we celebrated Holy Communion at St. Paul’s UCC. It doesn’t require much expansion of the thought about the oatmeal to include the body and blood taken into our own bodies during that special ceremony for our spiritual and bodily benefit and service to our Lord.

Some may say that these observations may be construed as “worshipping” the god of complexity. I mean it to be observations of the power and involvement of our Creator in this universe.

Dick Parsons

2/2/09

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**P.S. from EHS.**

Two things.

A. A. Marie and I both are cared for by the same cardiologist, an orthodox Jew whose parents escaped the holocaust in Lithuania. During regular visits we sometimes ask questions about those detailed pictures of the human heart (ours!) on the office walls. When one of us—you can guess which one—pushes the envelope with How? or Why?

questions about the complex details in those pictures, he responds with the Dick Parsons conclusion: "Only God . . . ."

B. B. Back in my own grad school days in the 1950s (Hamburg University, Germany) someone gifted me with me a little book—in German, of course—of Luther's own bons mots about creation. One of which was his marvel about a chicken egg: how the hen put it all together, fabricated a shell, got all that mysterious stuff inside, got the shell sealed so it didn't leak, and then delivered all that to the outside world—another genuine chicken, yet all in slime and goo format. How Mama just sitting on the egg for three weeks would change slime-and-goo into a fuzzy breathing chirping biped, how chicken little got out of the incubator—and on and on. Luther's conclusion—and title of the booklet—"Alles ist Wunder." Everything is a miracle.