

# Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus, Fiftieth Anniversary

Colleagues,

Something jubilant after last week's somber posting. In the second year of our decade-plus serving as "Global Mission Volunteers" in the ELCA (1995), Marie and I were in Addis Ababa at the seminary of the EECMY, the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus. Here "Evangelical" = Lutheran, and "Mekane Yesus" = Dwelling Place of Jesus. Our initial caretakers and mentors upon entry there were Loren and Edith Bliese, pioneer missionaries from the American Lutheran Church, a predecessor body of the ELCA. They arrived in 1960, just one year after EECMY was constituted—and stayed for 48 years. They have been major shapers in what the EECMY has now become. Just one facet of that is this: When constituted fifty years ago EECMY membership was 20,000. Today it's over 5 million. EECMY today has the second largest church membership in world Lutheranism. They know something about missions and evangelism that we mainliners don't. One is their mantra (which I've mentioned before): If you're baptized, you're a missionary.

Two weekends ago the EECMY celebrated its 50th birthday. Also the 110th year since the start of Evangelical missions in Ethiopia. Marie and I wish we could have been there. This ThTh post is the best we can do to join the celebration along with our friends and former students in the EECMY. One such student is the festival peacher mentioned below, Dr. Gemechis Desta Buba, now also an ELCA staffer. We also want to celebrate along with the Blieses, for Loren received an honorary doctorate

during the festivities. The grounds for that honorary degree are appended below. But first we start with Loren's own report to us of the public celebration.

If you want to see pictures GO to <<http://tinyurl.com/bxmhlh>>  
For general info about EECMY it's <<http://www.eecmy.org/>>

Peace and Joy!  
Ed Schroeder

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From Loren Bliese: EECMY Jubilee and Commemoration of 110 Years of Mission

All praise and honor to God for the wonders of his work through national and expatriate missionaries in Ethiopia for the past 110 years, and for the 50 years of growth since the organization of the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus.

The celebration began Saturday, Jan. 17, 2009 with a gathering of guests from Ethiopia and abroad in the Ethiopian Conference Hall in Addis Ababa. Rev. Iteffa Gobena, the President of EECMY, welcomed everyone, and summarized the spiritual and developmental growth of the church, which has come about through the grace of Jesus. Bishop Jim Arends of the La Crosse Synod of ELCA led opening prayers along with representatives of other churches from Europe and Africa. Mr. Degefe Bula, the spokesperson of the Ethiopian House of Federation, delivered a speech. Messages were brought from various local and international churches.

Dr. Gemechis Desta, a Mekane Yesus Theological Seminary graduate now serving in the ELCA Evangelical Outreach and Congregational Mission Unit, proclaimed the word on the basis of the Jubilee fifty year celebration of freedom in Leviticus 25. He noted the past times of persecution, and how by the blood of Jesus the

church now has been freed. It has a new opportunity to proclaim freedom in Christ to the whole world.

Rev. Rafael Malpica, the Executive Director of ELCA Global Mission Unit, brought greetings, noting the blessings the immigrant sons and daughters of EECMY have brought to the ELCA. Greetings were given by representatives of many partners. Getachew Bellete traced the historical origins of Christian witness in Ethiopia. Dr. Tesfaye brought greetings from Word of Life Church, noting that both denominations trace lines back to Presbyterian missionary Dr. Thomas Lambe.

Medals of honor were awarded to many Gospel pioneers, and a list of places to be named in memory of many departed leaders was read. Included in these was the designation of the men's dormitory in Mekane Yesus Theological Seminary in memory of Dr. Herbert G. Schaefer. He was the founder of the American Lutheran Mission, and by God's guidance served as a catalyst to bring the Lutheran work of various European and American missions together in the founding of EECMY in 1959.

Lunch was served to the guests, after which a panel presented "Christian Social Responsibility and the Role of the Church in Society." The wholistic ministry of EECMY was traced from its beginning with both Gospel proclamation, and medical and educational services. A challenge was given for the haves and have-nots to work together in the love of Christ to help people regain dignity and to bring out the best in everyone.

More greetings were brought from partners, the Lutheran World Federation, and All Africa Council of Churches. Historically, together with Ethiopian Gospel pioneers, the Swedish Evangelical Mission, American Presbyterian Mission, and German Hermannsburg Mission work encouraged the growth of many strong synods in Western Ethiopia. The Norwegian Lutheran Mission has sent 600

missionaries to Ethiopia since beginning work in 1948. This has brought fruit with active growing churches in many ethnic groups in the south. The ELCA work began under the American Lutheran Church in the north. There are now thirteen congregations and 36 outreach places in the North Central Ethiopia Synod, and three congregations in other northern regions. Other European missions worked in more locations together with Ethiopians who have planted the Gospel throughout Ethiopia. Everyone praised God that the church has grown from 29,000 in 1959 to five million in 2009.

Sunday morning a mass worship gathering was held in Millenium Hall, which was built for the celebration of the 2000th year of Christ. (According to the Ethiopian calendar the third millennium began 9/11/2007.) A choir from various EECMY churches led the singing. The President and Vice President of the Church led the worship along with participation of an archbishop from Norway and the pastors of the EECMY. Recognition was given in a Marriage Jubilee for a very large group of EECMY couples who have been married for over fifty years. Dr. Gemechis brought a message based on Genesis 26:19-22, tracing the troubles and opposition of the past, but the joy of God's blessing. This hope was based on the words, "Now the LORD has made room for us, and we shall be fruitful in the land." A song composed with this theme was sung by the choir, with a chorus for the congregation.

After more greetings from partner churches, special prayers were made for mercy and reconciliation. A presentation was made of the EECMY vision for the next fifty years. Then flags of the regions where the EECMY works were brought forward by present adult members. Children representing these regions then received the flags in a ceremony. This ended with vows of dedication for all in the congregation to go forward with this renewed vision of service to Christ in unity and love.

In the afternoon a ceremony inaugurating the Mekane Yesus University was held at the seminary. The university will incorporate the various theological and educational colleges of the church. Displays from the EECMY synods and national programs showed the activities of the church with pictures and crafts.

Sunday evening an honors program was given at the Sheraton Hotel. Many leaders were honored for their service to the church. Four honorary doctorates were awarded by Mekane Yesus Theological Seminary. The recipients were 96-year old President Emeritus Emmanuel Abraham for his long leadership to EECMY, and three for language development: Rev. Tesgara Hirpo for work on Oromo, Rev. Neils Reimer from Presbyterian Church USA for his work on Anuak, and Rev. Dr. Loren Bliese of ELCA for his work on Afar and 20 other languages while serving as Translation Consultant for the Bible Society of Ethiopia. Rev. Reimer has been serving for over 50 years, and Rev. Bliese for over 48 years in Ethiopia. The honorary degrees were presented by His Excellency Girma Wolde-Giyorgis, the President of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia. In the accompanying speech he voiced his pleasure in awarding degrees to those who have served so many years contributing to the development of the languages and cultures of the Ethiopian nationalities, and finally congratulated EECMY on its 50th year Jubilee.

Praise be to God for his faithfulness, guidance and saving power through the years!

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HONORARY DEGREE FOR LOREN BLIESE: (Most of the following profile was read at the presentation of an honorary Doctor of Language Development by Mekane Yesus Theological Seminary, Addis Ababa, January 18, 2009)

PROFILE AND LIST OF PUBLICATIONS SENT TO EECMY FOR 50TH

## ANNIVERSARY JANUARY, 2009

Rev. Loren Bliese came to Ethiopia in 1960 with the American Lutheran Mission, and served for 44 years as a missionary under the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus. After retirement he has continued serving under EECMY about half time as a missionary volunteer of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

Rev. Bliese served for eleven years as an evangelistic missionary in Wallo. During these years he helped to organize EECMY congregations in Waldia, Worgesa, Wuchale and surrounding areas. He started the EECMY outreach to the Afar ethnic group in 1963, conducting a mobile clinic service in the nomadic area, and building a literacy school. He also initiated literacy work in the Wuchale area, and by 1976 was administering 70 literacy centers of EECMY. In the 1973-1975 Wallo famine he helped his wife Edith organize famine relief feeding programs connected to many of the literacy centers.

From 1970-1972 Rev. Bliese served as principal of Mekane Yesus Theological Seminary. During this time the Theological Education by Extension program and the BTh program were initiated. During furlough in the US the next year, Rev. Bliese completed course work for a PhD in Linguistics. He returned to Ethiopia, and along with missionary work, used the next five years to write a dissertation on Afar grammar. Besides his dissertation he has published numerous articles on Afar linguistics, music and culture, two on Amharic, one on Konso, and many on Old Testament studies analyzing Hebrew literary structures, and on Bible translation. A study of Song of Songs was published by Yemissrach Dimts as Yefiqr Qine. He also published "History of the North Ethiopia Area Work: Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus-1957-1972" in Mission to Ethiopia: An American Lutheran Memoir 1957-2003. From 1985-2004 Dr. Bliese taught Old

Testament courses every semester at Mekane Yesus Theological Seminary, and occasionally at the Ethiopian Graduate School of Theology. For many years Dr. Bliese served as the English recording secretary for EECMY General Assemblies.

In 1976 EECMY seconded Dr. Bliese to the Bible Society of Ethiopia to be coordinator for the Afar Bible translation project. Three books of the New Testament were published along with New Reader Bible stories. From 1979-2006 he served as United Bible Societies' Translation Consultant for Ethiopia and Djibouti. During this time he helped in the training of translators, checking for quality control, and administration of projects related to the Bible Society of Ethiopia. He has worked on the following:

Bibles: Western Oromo, New Amharic, Revised Tigrinya, Wolaitta

New Testaments (most continuing toward a full Bible): Aari, Afar, Anuak, Arsi Oromo, Bench, Borana, Burji, Eastern Oromo, Gedeo (training), Guji Oromo, Gumuz, Gurage, Hadiyya, Kafa, Kambaata, Konso, Kunama, Koorete, Maale, Me'en, Sidaama, Silti.

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#### List of Publications by Loren F. Bliese:

1966, 1970 and 1976. (Reports on Evangelistic Outreach Program in Wallo, Ethiopia). CHURCH GROWTH BULLETIN.

1970. "The Lexicon—A Key to Culture; with Illustrations from Afar Word Lists". JOURNAL OF ETHIOPIAN STUDIES 8.2, 1-19.

1973. "Notes on the Reconstruction of Glottal Stop in the Aussa Dialect of Afar". ANTHROPOLOGICAL LINGUISTICS 15.8, 373-382.

1975. "Afar Vowel Dissimilation: A Problem in Rule Ordering". ANTHROPOLOGICAL LINGUISTICS 17.3, 102-106.

1975. "Amharic Language Interference in Learning Greek". PROCEEDINGS OF THE FIRST UNITED STATES CONFERENCE ON ETHIOPIAN STUDIES. Ed., H. Marcus, Michigan State University: East Lansing, pp. 303-318.

1976. "Proportional Relations and Synchronic Developments in Afar Morphology". FOLIO ORIENTALIA 17, 41-50.

1976. "Afar". THE NON-SEMITIC LANGUAGES OF ETHIOPIA. Ed., M.L. Bender, Michigan State University: East Lansing, pp. 133-165.

1978-79. "The Tragedies of Three Afar Girls". ETHIOPIANIST NOTES 2.3, 49-59.

1979. "Constraints on Clitics in Amharic". FOLIA ORIENTALIA 20, 133-142.

1980. "Bible Translation from SV0 to SOV Languages in Ethiopia". FOLIA ORIENTALIA 21, 163-169.

1980. "Amharic Interference in Afar Translation". BULLETIN OF THE SCHOOL OF ORIENTAL AND AFRICAN STUDIES, UNIVERSITY OF LONDON, 43.2, 345-356.

1980. "Translating Ancient Literature" (in Amharic). SEMINAR ON TRANSLATION. Addis Ababa University. pp. 182-190.

1981. A GENERATIVE GRAMMAR OF AFAR. Summer Institute of Linguistics Publications in Linguistics Number 65: University of Texas at Arlington.

1982-83. "Afar Songs". NORTHEAST AFRICAN STUDIES, 4.3, 51-76.

1986 (Coauthor with Sokka Gignarta). "Konso Exceptions to SOV Typology". JOURNAL OF ETHIOPIAN STUDIES 19, 1-40.

1986. Review of E.M. Parker and R.J. Hayward: AN AFAR-ENGLISH-FRENCH DICTIONARY (WITH GRAMMATICAL NOTES IN ENGLISH). BULLETIN



OF THE SCHOOL OF ORIENTAL AND AFRICAN STUDIES, UNIVERSITY OF LONDON.

1988. "A Discourse Analysis of Amharic Narrative". PROCEEDINGS OF THE EIGHTH INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON ETHIOPIAN STUDIES. Ed., Taddese Beyene, Institute of Ethiopian Studies: Addis Ababa and Frobenius: Frankfurt, pp. 613-621.

1988. "Metrical Sequences and Climax in the Poetry of Joel". OCCASIONAL PAPERS IN TRANSLATION AND TEXTLINGUISTICS 2.4, 52-84.

1988. "Chiastic Structures, Peaks and Cohesion in Nehemiah 9.6-37". THE BIBLE TRANSLATOR 39.2, 208-215.

1989. "Does the Verb Come Last in Your Language?" THE BIBLE TRANSLATOR 40.2, 219-227.

1990. "Figurative Language in the Psalms: some working notes from a translation team". THE BIBLE TRANSLATOR 41.2, 445.

1990. "Structurally Marked Peak in Psalms 1-24". OCCASIONAL PAPERS IN TRANSLATION AND TEXTLINGUISTICS 4.4, 265-321.

1991. (Coauthor with Yvonne Genat). "A Discourse Analysis of Afar Narrative". JOURNAL OF AFROASIATIC LANGUAGES 3, 297-317.

1993. "Chiastic and Homogeneous Metrical Structures Enhanced by Word Patterns in Obadiah". JOURNAL OF TRANSLATION AND TEXTLINGUISTICS 6.3, 210-227.

1994. "The Afar Drum Song Karambo". PROCEEDINGS OF THE ELEVENTH INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE OF ETHIOPIAN STUDIES, Vol. I. Edited by Bahru Zewde, Richard Pankhurst & Taddese Beyene, 583-594.

1994. "Symmetry and Prominence in Hebrew Poetry: With Examples from Hosea." DISCOURSE PERSPECTIVES ON HEBREW POETRY IN THE SCRIPTURES, UBS MONOGRAPH SERIES, No. 7, Ernst R. Wendland,

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1998. "Ethiopia Launches Aari New Testament". WORLD REPORT (United Bible Societies: Reading) #333 (September, 1998), 14.

1999. "The Poetics of Habakkuk." JOURNAL OF TRANSLATION AND TEXTLINGUISTICS 12, 47-75.

2000. "Translating Psalm 23 in Traditional Afar Poetry." in HEBREW POETRY IN THE BIBLE: A GUIDE FOR UNDERSTANDING AND FOR TRANSLATING. Lynell Zogbo and Ernst R. Wendland. United Bible Societies: New York, 185-194.

2001. "Bible inspires woman to serve people with AIDS", "'Born evangelist' led to Bible Society work", and "How a blind man gained clear vision: a true story". WORLD REPORT (United Bible Societies: Reading) #363 (October, 2001), 24-27.

2002. "YEFIQR QINE" ("A Love Poem", analysis of the Biblical "Song of Songs" in Amharic). Yemisrach Dimts: Addis Ababa.

2002. Review of "Poetry in the Hebrew Bible: Selected Studies from Vetus Testamentum," Ed., David E. Orton, in REVIEW OF BIBLICAL LITERATURE, SOCIETY OF BIBLICAL LITERATURE online at [www.bookreviews.org](http://www.bookreviews.org).

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Zephaniah." JOURNAL OF TRANSLATION AND TEXTLINGUISTICS 17, 36-68.

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2004. "History of the North Ethiopia Area Work: Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus – 1957-1972". MISSION TO ETHIOPIA: AN AMERICAN LUTHERAN MEMOIR 1957-2003. Eds. Leonard Flachmann and Merlyn Seitz. Kirk: Minneapolis, 42-63.

Forthcoming. A THEOLOGICAL CODE FOR SONG OF SONGS: SYMBOLIC NUMBERS, LITERARY STRUCTURE AND THEOLOGY IN THE SONG OF SONGS. Bibal: North Richard Hills.

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## **His Hand Was on Lincoln's Bible, but . . .**

Colleagues,

His hand was on Lincoln's Bible.

I too wept to be a TV witness of it all. For joy.

But his theology wasn't Lincoln's. Nor the Bible's.

Obama's first address from the famed Bully Pulpit of the American presidency was FROGBA, the Folk Religion of God Bless America. And God will bless America because "Yes, we can." Yes, we can make it happen—with no repentance, just our own historic American goodness. Our enemies may be sinners. We are not. It was the out-going president's theology. No change. No change

from the national theology of his predecessor.

When the address concluded, I wept again. Not for joy.

Lincoln's Bible had told him, the 16th US president: "No. we can't." Better said, "No, you can't." He heard God addressing America in that Bible in direct speech. Even though any mention of Christ was rare when Lincoln spoke from that bully pulpit, his Deist(?) faith was "bully" Biblical in this one point for sure: In a world of sinners God is first of all everybody's critic. Every nation's critic. America's critic too. America was an "almost chosen nation"—Lincoln's very words—but just like all nations in world history. In Lincoln's Bible "the nations" are never the good guys. God weighs the nations and they are ALWAYS "found wanting."

But FROGBA has no antenna for that message. Neither did this week's inaugural utterance, the first one from Number 44 from that bully pulpit.

And it could have been "easy." At least textually "easy." For the inaugural address was bumping up against Lincoln's theology in Lincoln's Bible all the time. But it stayed on the surface in its call for "change." Never got beneath the band-aid level of analysis and proposed remedy. Never got to the change—Big Change—that Lincoln (and his Bible) called for, God's direct address to America: "Repent." It's been cited before in these ThTh posts, Lincoln's words to the nation in 1863. Remember, this was right in the middle of America's own four years of self-destruction. Didn't we have enough trouble already? No, said Lincoln, the trouble was even worse than that. America was in trouble with God.

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*1863. We have been preserved, these many years, in peace and*

*prosperity. We have grown in numbers, wealth and power, as no other nation has ever grown. But we have forgotten God. We have forgotten the gracious hand which preserved us in peace, and multiplied and enriched and strengthened us; and we have vainly imagined, in the deceitfulness of our hearts, that all these blessings were produced by some superior wisdom and virtue of our own. Intoxicated with unbroken success, we have become too self-sufficient to feel the necessity of redeeming and preserving grace, too proud to pray to the God that made us! It behooves us then, to humble ourselves before the offended Power, to confess our national sins, and to pray for clemency and forgiveness.*

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Not that it's ever easy to call your own people to repent instead of just asking the "others" to do so – e.g., as on this past Tuesday: You, our enemies "uncle your fists"—for our hands are always open. Not easy at all when the folks needing to hear the call are your own people. Dangerous too. The first such repentance-caller in the NT was decapitated for his efforts. Gilbert and Sullivan put it this way: "When constabulary duty's to be done, a policeman's lot is not a happy one." President Obama might not have gotten elected had he telegraphed Lincoln's change-message to America during the political campaign. His then pastor, Jeremiah Wright, gave the Lincoln message, but Obama deserted him. "Not a plank in my platform."

However, the campaign is over. Now he IS the president, he's head-honcho of America's constabulary. So be Lincolnesque, Mr. President. That's your job. All the more since you counsel us on facing up to "the test" we are undergoing. Be Lincolnesque and remind us—as Lincoln did—just who THE Tester is. Who's putting us through this exam? Is it the Final Examiner? Lincoln thought so in the midst of the Civil War. Why is it different in the

current wars we are waging? And if it is the Final Examiner—Lincoln would have said, SINCE it is the Final Examiner—how do you pass that test? Lincoln said it with the Bible's word for change. Repent.

"The powers that be are ordained by God," St. Paul tells us—ordained to be our critics when we do wrong and our benefactors when we don't. Yes, that's their "duty"—not always a "happy" one. Now President Obama's too. Remember, Paul gives such theological clout, such divine authorization, to the Roman emperor, a very non-Judeo-Christian guy. When Paul wrote those words, Nero was emperor!

Be Lincolnesque, Mr. President. From Lincoln's Bible take Lincoln's words, and claim them as your own:

"My fellow citizens, I stand before you today humbled by the task before us. I must tell you, as did President #16, whose Bible was under my hand, that

- we have forgotten God.
- We have forgotten the gracious hand which preserved us . . .
- we have vainly imagined,
- in the deceitfulness of our hearts,
- that all these blessings were produced by some superior wisdom and virtue of our own.
- we have become too self-sufficient to feel the necessity of redeeming and preserving grace,
- too proud to pray to the God that made us!
- It behooves us then, to humble ourselves before the offended Power
- to confess our national sins,
- to pray for clemency and forgiveness."

Is it not your duty, Mr. President—indeed not a happy one—but

duty, God-given duty, naytheless, to put these Lincolnesque add-ons into that inaugural speech? To move us Americans from the band-aid level of your analysis to the depth dimension (diagnosis level 3, in Crossings lingo), the God-problem confronting all your fellow citizens? The first-ever president to come from Illinois did. Yes, you can do it too. It's your job.

Here are some possibilities for Lincoln Add-Ons [hereafter LA0] to what you told the world 48 hours ago.

We the People have remained faithful to the ideals of our forbearers, and true to our founding documents.

[LA0 Not true. Surely not to the founding document under your hand as you took the oath.]

That we are in the midst of crisis is now well understood.

[LA0 Radical revision needed here in your text. Until the God-problem confronting us is admitted, there is no understanding of the crisis at all. Crisis is the Greek word for judgment. You've got to talk about the Judge. Worse still, confront that Judge].

Homes have been lost, jobs shed, businesses shuttered. . . . a sapping of confidence across our land; a nagging fear that America's decline is inevitable . . . These are the indicators of crisis.

[LA0 Indicators, yes. But when you say "crisis," tell the people who the critic is. I did.]

The challenges we face are real . . . . But know this America: They will be met.

[LA0 Not if you ignore the critic. Help this hapless nation "meet the crtitic," step one in meeting those real challenges.]

On this day, we gather because we have chosen hope over fear.

[LA0 That Bible your hand's on says neither hope nor fear are

items of choice. They are responses to two opposite realities coming from the outside. When God's the critic, then fear-of God!—is the appropriate response. That was absent in the nation in 1863. Most likely it's still absent in 2009. Btw, President #32, Roosevelt, was mistaken when he said "We have nothing to fear but fear itself." He too "forgot God."]

On this day, we come to proclaim an end to . . . worn-out dogmas that for far too long have strangled our politics.

[LA0 Biggest dogma that strangles is FROGBA. Worn-out in the USA it is not. Seek to lead the nation away from it. First of all "Physician, heal thyself."]

We remain a young nation, but in the words of Scripture, the time has come to set aside childish things.

[LA0 Good line from that book under your hand. FROGBA is the nation's super "childish thing." Kids never think they need repentance. Set it aside. In your own theology—and in that of your people.]

The God-given promise that all are equal, all are free . . . The long, rugged path towards prosperity and freedom . . . . We remain the most prosperous, powerful nation on Earth.

[LA0 God's freedom promise is not the one you're talking about. Paul and Silas were enjoying God's freedom-promise when they sat in chains in the jail of Philippi. And prosperity is not a promise. Sufficiency, "enough-ness" has Biblical support. Not prosperity. See if you can't get that word removed from the American shibboleth. And whether on January 20, 2009 America still is—or will remain—as the most prosperous, powerful nation on earth is God's judgment call, not yours.]

Starting today, we must pick ourselves up, dust ourselves off, and begin again the work of remaking America.

[LA0 Won't work if you don't acknowledge the Judge. It never has



for any prior empire on the earth. Why should it work now?  
Except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish.]

We will . . . .

We will . . . .

We will . . . .

All this we can do. All this we will do.

Now, there are some who question the scale of our ambitions.

[LAO Yup. The one administering the current testing.]

[Such questioners] have forgotten what this country has already  
done, what free men and women can achieve.

[LAO Oops. The forgetfulness is more drastic than that. Look  
again at my words about what we have forgotten.]

What the cynics fail to understand is that the ground has  
shifted beneath them, that the stale political arguments that  
have consumed us for so long, no longer apply.

[LAO The ground shift in 1863 was more seismic than that. Isn't  
it also true in 2009? Jeremiah Wright said so. He was making my  
speech. You will conclude this address with the ancient American  
mantra—GBA. But to do that without acknowledging the de facto  
relationship of God and the nation is whistling in the dark.  
That mantra is indeed “stale” politics. That is what “no longer  
applies” to America. Worse still than stale politics, it borders  
on blasphemy.]

We . . . will be held to account

[LAO Tell them to whom you and all of them are finally  
accountable.]

The market. Its power to generate wealth and expand freedom is  
unmatched. . . . The market can spin out of control.

[LAO In that book under your hand this is called Mammon. Mammon  
is not money per se, but money becomes Mammon, an alternate  
deity, when you trust it as you seem to do. And from your

proposed rescue packages surely you do. As do your fellow citizens. Money will save us. Just trust it—and us the money-managers. Here there is no “change” at all. But here is where change, BIG change, is needed. If my kind of call for repentance is too tough for you to follow, why not make this the message of your first four years: “In God we trust. Which one?”]

And so, to all other peoples and governments who are watching today, from the grandest capitals to the small village where my father was born: know that America is a friend of each nation and every man, woman and child who seeks a future of peace and dignity, and we are ready to lead once more.

[LAO Ready to lead once more? Prior question for the nation was the one I raised: are we ready to follow? Follow you know Whom. Besides that, when did God ever designate this “almost chosen people” —or any people—to be world leader? Follower is the divine mandate. Collaborator is the world’s wish. Claims to world leadership (again) approach blasphemy. I expect that you will hear from voices elsewhere in the world about this sentence: “Haven’t you noticed that you aren’t leader any longer? And the evidence is scant that by your bootstraps—or by Mammon— you can ever put Humpty-Dumpty back together again.”]

Our security emanates from the justness of our cause; the force of our example; the tempering qualities of humility and restraint.

[LAO Wrong. Just plain wrong. Read that book.]

We will not apologize for our way of life nor will we waver in its defense.

[LAO Wrong. Just plain wrong. Read that book. Or my 1863 speech again.]

And for those who seek to advance their aims by inducing terror and slaughtering innocents, we say to you now that “Our spirit

is stronger and cannot be broken. You cannot outlast us, and we will defeat you."

[LAO As to who will outlast whom, who will defeat whom, be much more cautious. Those outcomes are in Someone Else's hand. My take was to call for humility: "It behooves us then, to humble ourselves before the offended Power, to confess our national sins, and to pray for clemency and forgiveness." Why not add humility as a major term to your bully-pulpit vocabulary in the days to come? And while you're at it, help your fellow citizens learn that "pride"—almost as American as motherhood and apple pie—is not a recommended virtue in the book under your hand. It's a vice. To be expurgated, repented. No divine approval at all for pride.]

We cannot help but believe that the old hatreds shall someday pass.

[LAO No grounds in The Book for that ever happening on its own. Much more major renovation must come to pass before hatred passes. Namely, the BIG change.]

To those leaders around the globe who seek to sow conflict . . . know that your people will judge you on what you can build, not what you destroy.

[LAO By the same measure with which you measure, you too shall be measured.]

We will extend a hand if you are willing to unclench your fist.

[LAO We are not innately benign to our fellow humans. We killed each other, fellow citizens, from 1861-65. The clenched fist is not unknown in our midst. Denied routinely, but not unknown. Yet more unknown is the divine set of clenched fingers holding our fate. Give attention to that, as I sought to do.]

Nor can we consume the world's resources without regard to effect.

[LA0 Here's a thought that's in the Book. God made a primordial covenant in Noah's day that he would not destroy the earth again. It was actually a covenant with the earth itself. If "we" are the major consumers—and we are—consuming the planet, then one of the "effects" we can anticipate is that the Creator, remembering his covenant with the earth, will move against the earth's destroyers and measure out to them what they are measuring out to the planet. One more reason for ringing the repentance bell. For our own survival.]

What is demanded . . . What is required . . . We have duties. .  
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[LA0 Were my own theology even more Biblical (say, for example, Lutheran) I'd note the language of God's law in these words. Good law. Which is God's own program in preserving and also evaluating the world and all its citizens. But remember who the final demander, requirer, duty-giver is. And if the people have forgotten, tell them.]

This is the source of our confidence: the knowledge that God calls on us to shape an uncertain destiny.

[LA0 Oops, misplaced confidence. Destinies are bestowed. Uncertain they may well be. But Someone Else is the shaper.]

So let us mark this day in remembrance of who we are and how far we have traveled.

[LA0 Above all, remember whom we have forgotten.]

In the year of America's birth, in the coldest of months, a small band of patriots huddled by nine campfires on the shores of an icy river. The capital was abandoned. The enemy was advancing. The snow was stained with blood. At a moment when the outcome of our revolution was most in doubt, the father of our nation ordered these words be read to the people: "Let it be told to the future world that in the depth of winter, when

nothing but hope and virtue could survive, that the city and the country, alarmed at one common danger, came forth to meet it."

[LAO U.S. President #1 was a deist too, but his deism was different from mine. His God was distant, sent instructions to humankind, but never engaged in face-to-face confrontation. In my deism God is down on the ground, and in 1863 "trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored." Better, President #44, would have been for you to cite my words from that year. Then your final paragraph might have been more promising. Here's what you did say:]

America, in the face of our common dangers, in this winter of our hardship, let us remember these timeless words; with hope and virtue, let us brave once more the icy currents, and endure what storms may come; let it be said by our children's children that when we were tested we refused to let this journey end, that we did not turn back nor did we falter; and with eyes fixed on the horizon and God's grace upon us, we carried forth that great gift of freedom and delivered it safely to future generations.

[LAO This would have been better: America, in the face of our danger with God, in this winter of our forgetfulness, let us remember Lincoln's timeless words; with hope and virtue, let us follow his call to humble ourselves before the offended Power, to confess our national sins, and to pray for clemency and forgiveness. Then only can we hope to brave once more the icy currents, to endure what storms may come. Then, then only, will our children's children be able to say that when we were tested by the Final Examiner, we did not turn our back on that repentance call. But with humble eyes, and humble hearts we answered that call, and listened again for God's word of grace upon us-and from that posture we carried forth that great gift we have received and handed it on to future generations.

Were this to happen to this nation it would indeed be God

blessing the United States of America.]

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One more Lutheran addendum.

The benediction offered at the close of the ceremony on Tuesday referenced the line from the song, “He’s got the whole world in his hands.” More than once I remember Blessed Bob Bertram citing that line with this add-on. “Whole world in his hands. Yes, both of them. And with the left one God is doing such and so.” Another LAO to that might be: “And in that left hand, America, God is holding Amos’s famous plumbline measuring the nations—our nation too. Measuring what—better whom—our nation has forgotten.”

God’s blessing business throughout the OT, says super scholar Claus Westermann, is the work of God’s left hand and the salvation business is God’s right hand work. [Yup, he’s Lutheran.] So un-saved people, un-saved nations, can and do enjoy God’s blessing. They have been getting blessings since time immemorial —rain and sunshine, seedtime and harvest, progeny and achievements. The rubrics for that are legal. Do right, get blessed. Do the opposite, expect the opposite. Doesn’t get you reconciled to God, but it does forestall your demise.

In Lincoln’s 1863 call to repentance he was executing God’s left-hand work. A call to change our behaviors—to preserve the nation, to forestall our demise. It was not a call to “Repent and believe the Good News.” Read his text again. That other repentance in Mark 1:15 above comes from other agents, agents of God’s other hand.

But left-hand work is the God-given calling of secular governments. It is constabulary duty, including the agenda of left-handed repentance. So even though such duty is not a happy

one, when you're the nation's chief constable, just do it.

In our OT reading for this past Sunday (Epiphany 2) we heard this from I Samuel: "The Word of God was rare in those days." Ouch, I said. Even words from the left side of God's mouth are rare in our land in these days—in both church and society. Will the inaugural message be different? It wasn't. But it is your duty, Mr. President. Just do it.

Peace and joy!

Ed Schroeder

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## Christless Christianity

Colleagues,

Bill Moorhead is Senior Pastor at Pacific Hills Lutheran Church in Omaha, Nebraska. Back in the early 1970s we met as student and prof in the classroom at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis. We've stayed in touch. He even brought me out to Omaha a year or two ago to do a Crossings gig with his congregation. He sends me stuff every now and then. Short while ago he told me about Horton's book on "Christless Christianity." I'd never heard of it. So in old professorial pattern I "assigned" it to him as a book review. Here's what he sent me this week.

Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder

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A member of my parish gave me a copy of Michael Horton's "Christless Christianity: The Alternative Gospel of the American

Church" (Baker Books, 2008, 270 pages, hardcover) this past November. Until then I had never heard of Michael Horton. Well, I had, but the Michael Horton I know is on my Board of Elders. Aside from that fact, what caught my eye immediately once the book was in my hands were the words "alternative gospel." I am a regular reader of Thursday Theology, so those words rang all kinds of familiar bells and piqued my interest.

I began reading the book almost as soon as I received it. It didn't take me very long—just a couple of pages, in fact—to realize that something is really bothering Michael Horton. He wrote *Christless Christianity* to let us know what that "something" is. He doesn't beat around the bush. His concern is the whole American church, but he is particularly concerned about conservative American evangelicalism, that place in the American Protestant spectrum wherein Horton himself dwells (see <http://www.whitehorseinn.org/> and <http://www.christlesschristianity.org/> for more information). His claim (almost a mantra for being stated so repetitively throughout) is that there is an "American captivity" of the church. Further, such a captivity is known by its fruits: our needs and comforts, where "everything is measured by our happiness," rather than God's rescue operation in Christ, have become the focus of the American church's ministry, particularly its preaching. Horton's term for this malady is very similar to, if not identical with, what regular Thursday Theology folks read and hear about: an alternative (and anathema) gospel.

Such is Horton's basic and straightforward thesis. The American church is captive (Horton spins his language here from Luther's *Babylonian Captivity of the Church*) to another gospel, which Horton terms "moralistic, therapeutic deism," a term he borrows from sociologist Christian Smith. "The theological term for this malady is Pelagianism. [I]t is our most natural theology," states Horton. He even picks up on Augustine's "incurvatus in



se” [sinners are humans “curved back into themselves”] as he lays out his criticism of both American evangelicalism and liberalism. Therefore, the American church’s message is Christless and no gospel at all. Maybe, Horton hedges, we haven’t yet arrived at truly Christless Christianity, but we are well on our way, conservative and liberal alike. Comparing it to Muzak, Horton states that the narcissistic message of American Christianity “has simply become trivial, sentimental, affirming, and irrelevant.” It is a message of “do more, try harder.”

I can second Horton’s motion from my own experience. I have served my current parish for over 31 years, and although I lay NO claim to having it all together in the pulpit, I can certainly recognize a chaotic, if not Christless, sermon when I hear one. Over my 35 years in the ministry I have become increasingly concerned about the phenomenon. I usually, and unfortunately, have this experience in gatherings of Lutherans where homiletical offerings are kerygmatically challenged. (Hey, can’t we do better in front of our peers?) So much Law, so little, so VERY little, Gospel. So much Gospel turned into Law. So much confusion of, or worse yet, so much ignorance of the two kinds of righteousness (see Luther’s sermon of 1519). I’ve walked away on many such occasions wondering, “Where’s the hope? Where’s MY hope?”

Horton cites many examples of the kerygma problem in American evangelicalism: Robert Schuller (Self-Esteem: The New Reformation), George Barna, Joel Osteen (Become a Better You), Joyce Meyers, Rick Warren (The Purpose-Driven Life), and others. Their common thread in Horton’s view is their pragmatic, self-help (no Savior really needed) approach that renders all of them theologically and kerygmatically vacuous. Horton’s diagnosis is that they do not offer what is really needed: the “great exchange”, the sweet swap as Bob Bertram termed it. There is no condemnation of the Law, no killing off of the Old Adam. And

therefore no real rescue. Sin is not total depravity, but trivialized as moral imperfection. God becomes a commodity. Quoting Joel Osteen from his appearance on Larry King Live, Horton reinforces the point: "But I don't have it in my heart to condemn people. I'm there to encourage them. I see myself more as a coach, as a motivator to help them experience the life God has for us."

Horton's antidote for all this malady? Preach the real Gospel! If I remember correctly, that's pretty much Jerome Burce's point in *Proclaiming the Scandal*. If there's a problem, don't go trying to find a false solution. Proclaim the Gospel! Let it do its job.

One final personal point. In a schedule pinch, I completed the rough draft of this review this past Monday morning while waiting for my wife to complete a scheduled appointment. I was in a waiting room. I finished writing, or so I thought, and then laid the pages aside momentarily before rereading them for any possible tweaks. Before doing that, however, I happened to scan across the top of the coffee table in front of me. It was strewn with various magazines, including a Victoria's Secret catalog and the October 20, 2008, issue of Newsweek. I picked up the Newsweek and began thumbing through it. (Yes, I did.) And there it was. Page 16. "Belief Watch. Columnist Lisa Miller." A piece on Victoria (!) Osteen. Miller pulled no punches, stating "the theology driving all [their] success is thin." "All of this is fine (Victoria Osteen's home-spun advice about "Christian" wifely-and other-behavior), in the pages of a women's magazine or a self-help book. But what has God got to do with it?" Michael Horton would answer, "Not much!"

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# Mission from a Position of Weakness

Colleagues,

Every now and then I do a book review for *MISSIOLOGY*, the journal of the American Society of Missiology. Couple days ago I sent this to the book review editor. So it's also this week's post for ThTh #552. Exactly one year ago today it was ThTh number 500. When/where will it end?

Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder

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## **Mission from a Position of Weakness.**

**By Paul Yonggap Jeong**

**American University Studies**

**Series 7: Theology and Religion Vol. 269**

**New York (et al): Peter Lang**

**2007, xiv + 154 pp. hardback. 74 Swiss Franks**

**ISBN 978-1-4331-0096-3**

This book is Paul Jeong's doctoral dissertation at Fuller Theological Seminary. Its thesis is: Christian mission—beginning with Jesus himself—was “mission from a position of weakness,” the position of the underdog, the nobody, the outsider, the marginated. Jesus as suffering servant Messiah—no surprise—is the archetype for all Christian mission. Yet mission from a position of weakness has not been true throughout mission history. Also in our own day. Too bad. Christian mission is undermined—in worst cases, fails completely—when the “position”

of the missionary is one of power. Conclusion: the principle of mission from a position of weakness should be the foundational mission paradigm for the whole Church of Christ.

Jeong documents his thesis with one chapter portraying “weakness” missiology in each of the following:

- Luke-Acts, Pauline Theology, Two case studies from world mission history (the Celtic Church and Wm Carey), selected missiological writings (Kirk, Newbigin, Bosch, Moltmann, Yoder, Las Casas and Pentacostalism). He closes the circle with an extended analysis of the history of the Korean Church where weakness-mission and power-mission are still in conflict.

Each chapter is a pearl in itself, but this reviewer longed for a firmer thread holding the necklace together. Perhaps that’s a bit much to ask from a doctoral dissertation. Questions such as these persist:

1. Is weakness vs. power merely a sociological-political “position” from which the missionary works, or is it already a theology, finally a particular sort of Gospel, that is being proclaimed by that missionary? Jeong leads us to believe that the same “true” Gospel can be proclaimed from either “position,” but that it is the position which renders that Gospel finally more or less credible. I don’t think so.
2. In his chapter on Paul, where he works through the Pauline texts in I and II Corinthians, Jeong never tells us that Paul’s sharpest criticism of his Corinthian competitors, those “superlative apostles,” was not the high and mighty “position” they assumed over the “peasants” in the congregation, but their “other Gospel” that accompanied their self-positioning. Paul is at pains to show the beleaguered Corinthian Christians that the self-assumed

“glory” of these missionaries is of a piece with their “theology of glory,” and that this glory-theology—yes, every glory-theology—is in conflict with the theology of the cross. In fact, it negates the theology of the Crucified and Risen Messiah. And therefore Paul shouts out his mantra in the opening paragraphs of I Corinthians: “I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified.” “Power-position” in Gospel-proclamation is (always?) linked with “glory-Gospel,” and all glory-gospels are not the Good News rock on which Jesus builds his church. Jeong almost says this, but he doesn’t show us how and why this is so. And thus his critique of power-position in mission never lets us see why it really is wrong—not simply because it is contrary to the way Jesus did his mission—the WWJD argument—but because it contradicts the Good News itself that is at the very center of Jesus’ mission—and therefore ours as well.

3. This item may just be something coming from a curmudgeonly old Lutheran. Although “theology of the cross” is Jeong’s frequent label for the golden thread of his message, he never once mentions Luther in connection with the term. If anyone, it is Moltmann who gets the credit. But had he asked Moltmann, he would have been told that it was Luther who bestowed on western theology the language of cross-theology vs. glory-theology. And that Luther did so with his own exposition of the very same Corinthian texts that Jeong highlights. It’s all there in Luther’s classic “Heidelberg Theses” of 1518. Makes me wonder: Is Luther unknown at Fuller?
4. To be sure, you can’t say everything in one dissertation. So we can perhaps hope for a sequel from Jeong, a second book that applies the same “weakness” dipstick to church life today—not just missiology—especially in the USA. Here’s a thesis: the American “solution” to theological

disputes among Protestant Christians was denominationalism—each group going its own way. But in doing so each group built its own modest (or not so modest) empire. However, empires always bring with them glory-theology—willy nilly. A “weakness-empire” is an oxymoron. If the “empire” of the 16th-century Roman church was afflicted with “glory-theology,” as Luther contended, then how can mini-empires of smaller church pyramids be any different? If denominational churches in the USA—especially among us so-called main-liners—are shrinking, shrinking, is it sociology that shows us why, or is it glory-gospels and power-pyramids that are being exposed—yes, exposed by God? There’s only one apostolic solution for coping with glory gospels. It’s Jeong’s thesis for mission from weakness: “I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified.”

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## The Maasai Creed

Colleagues,

Something short and to the point for the first day of The Year of our Lord 2009, the Day of the Circumcision and Name of Jesus.

It’s the Maasai Creed, a creed composed in 1960 by the Maasai people—an indigenous African tribe of semi-nomads located primarily in Kenya and northern Tanzania of East Africa – in collaboration with Roman Catholic missionaries from the Congregation of the Holy Ghost. The creed seeks to confess the promise at the core of the Christian faith within the daily life of Maasai culture.

Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder

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We believe in the one High God, who out of love created the beautiful world and everything good in it. He created man and wanted man to be happy in the world. God loves the world and every nation and tribe on the earth. We have known this High God in the darkness, and now we know him in the light. God promised in the book of his word, the Bible, that he would save the world and all nations and tribes.

We believe that God made good his promise by sending his son, Jesus Christ, a man in the flesh, a Jew by tribe, born poor in a little village, who left his home and was always on safari doing good, curing people by the power of God, teaching about God and man, showing that the meaning of religion is love. He was rejected by his people, tortured and nailed hands and feet to a cross, and died. He was buried in the grave, but the hyenas did not touch him, and on the third day, he rose from that grave. He ascended to the skies. He is the Lord.

We believe that all our sins are forgiven through him. All who have faith in him must be sorry for their sins, be baptized in the Holy Spirit of God, live the rules of love, and share the bread together in love, to announce the good news to others until Jesus comes again. We are waiting for him. He is alive. He lives. This we believe.

AMEN