

Christ Fulfills God's Law on Good Friday

Colleagues,

Here's an item from the CORE folks, major critics of the ELCA's slippery slide into anti-nomianism [= disregard for God's law], that calls for comment—and correction, I think.

At one of their web-sites <http://lutheranspersisting.wordpress.com/david-yeago-facing-reality-in-the-elca> we read this:

“There is a Reformation slogan that sums up the impossibility [of the ELCA's position] here: ‘What the law demands, the gospel bestows.’ The law demands righteousness, the gospel bestows righteousness, and it does so by bringing Christ to us and us to Christ. He is the living fulfillment of the law, the one in whom all that the law requires is fully and unquestionably realized. His righteousness covers our sin, when we become one with him by faith, but at the same time, he lives in us, which means that righteousness dwells in us, alive and triumphant, and we begin to live a new kind of life. But if the gospel bestows what the law demands, then without agreeing substantially on what the law demands, we cannot agree on what the gospel bestows. And pushed to the end, such disagreement will easily turn into disagreement about Jesus Christ and his saving righteousness.”

“Lutherans persisting” is in that URL address, but the constant drumbeat of these persists for a “third use” of God's law—using Moses as mentor for how to follow Christ (as if the former had been raised from the dead to coach us

instead of the latter)—is persistently leading Lutherans in the wrong direction That's not just my idea. Here's a quote from a Swedish Lutheran: "The third use of the law, which was afterwards cultivated [among Lutherans], gave an authority to the law even where there was no sin, and thereby the new age was brought under the rule of the old . . . where the taskmaster of the old aeon no longer puts to death but rather gives life, a sort of surrogate life instead of the life of the Gospel." (Gustav Wingren: The Living Word [1949/1960], p. 145)

Back to the paragraph above. Confused –literally, “fused together”—here are law-righteousness and gospel-righteousness, two very different sorts of right-ness. Apples and oranges. Qualitatively different: OK-ness achieved by my performance vs. freebee OK-ness offered to failed-performers by Christ. This righteousness is grounded in Good Friday by virtue of Christ's performance and transmitted to non-performers simply (sola) by the non-performer trusting the offer.

And even here, the two performances are qualitatively different. Law-righteousness comes via moral effort; Gospel-righteousness comes via Christ's dying for sinners. That's not even so much “what he did,” as it is “what was done to him.” The “law of sin and death” did him in. On Good Friday Christ is not primarily the “agent” in the ancient meaning of that word (the subject of the sentence), but the “patient” in the ancient meaning of that word (the object in the sentence). Not the “doer” of the action, but the one “done to” by the action. On Good Friday Christ is not “doing” the law; the law is “doing” him, doing him in. He WAS crucified.

Gospel-righteousness is NOT Christ's own “law-righteousness,” his own perfect performance in keeping all the rules. Christ-

trusting sinners are “right” before God—that’s Gospel-righteousness—not because HE kept all the rules and then transferred this law-righteous achievement to sinners. Christ’s “fulfilling the law” centers on Good Friday. Here it is not perfect moral performance, an “ethical” fulfilling of the law, that he carries out, but court-room righteousness “fully” administered to him, juridical “fulfillment” of the law’s death sentence for sinners. He receives and willingly accepts the law’s death verdict on sinners, as a sinner. To that extent he is an active subject. But his action is not ethical performance. Instead it is his acceptance of the law’s action on him – in his body on the tree. That’s how he “fulfills” the law, fully receiving the law’s death sentence for sinners. That’s the righteousness that gets offered to sinners: Christ’s death sentence exchanged for our own. Law fulfilled. Filled full. It is finished.

If the Gospel bestows what the law demands, then, as Wingren reminds us, the law has the last word, and the Gospel fits into the process as God’s way to let the law have the last word and still have sinners come out alive. But that can’t be right. A “Reformation slogan”? Surely not Luther’s Reformation. Maybe Calvin’s?

Fundamental text here is Romans 8 at the very outset.

“There is now no more condemnation [of unrighteousness] for sinners who are in Christ Jesus.” I.e., they are righteous. How so? “For the [new] ‘law’ of the Spirit of life in Christ [that incredible Golgatha/Easter transaction, that sweet-swap] has set sinners free from the law of sin and of death.” Here’s how it unfolded. “God, by sending his own Son into human flesh to deal with sin now reigning in human flesh, by this way saw to it that the just requirement of the law [sinners must die] might be fulfilled in us.” Christ’s execution as friend of sinners

fulfills the law's death sentence for all those who entrust themselves to him. They enjoy the sweet swap. As Christ-trusters their own execution as sinner is already behind them. Their new "rightness" consists in constant Christ-connectedness. "Walking" while Christ-connected constitutes "walking according to [his] Spirit."

Since the law is always "a law of sin and death," to "walk" in its way, to "set one's mind" on the law as the "way to walk," is death, "hostile to God," "does not submit to God," "cannot please God." Paul puts all that under his umbrella word "flesh." Flesh is inescapably law-bound, with death sentence and execution, aka the law's sort of "justification" for sinners, yet to come.

Paul's summary sentence is this: "To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit [of Christ] is life and peace." That's the bottom-line difference between law-righteousness and Gospel-righteousness. When the Galatian promoters of that "other" Gospel tried to fuse the two righteousnesses into one, Paul's terse word was: If that can be done, then Christ died in vain.

For Lutherans this difference was classically spelled out in a well-known Luther essay on Two Kinds of Righteousness. It's a variation on Luther's drumbeat on the absolute necessity to make the distinction between God's law and God's gospel when interpreting the scriptures. Not to do so, so say the Lutheran Confessions, is to lose both.

Let's look at the "Lutherans persisting" paragraph above line for line. It needs some work.

"There is a Reformation slogan that sums up the impossibility [of the ELCA's position] here: 'What the law demands, the gospel bestows.'"

I don't know of any place in the confessional documents of Lutheranism, the Book of Concord, where that slogan is proposed or recommended. There may be some such a statement somewhere, but I don't remember ever having seen it. And because of the confessions' drumbeat not to con-fuse legal righteousness with Gospel-righteousness, they shouldn't have said it, if they actually ever did. My hunch is that its heritage is Lutheran Pietism where moral righteousness (doing the works of the law) and Gospel-righteousness (enjoying Christ's sweet swap) occasionally were fused.

"The law demands righteousness, the gospel bestows righteousness, and it does so by bringing Christ to us and us to Christ. "

But those are two different righteousnesses. What the Gospel offers is NOT what the law demands. One demands the death of the sinner, the other offers sinners life. Those are not identical operations. Life and death are not synonyms.

"He is the living fulfillment of the law, the one in whom all that the law requires is fully and unquestionably realized."

Yes, but the focus of the fulfillment is not Christ's ethical perfection, but this receiving our death sentence. That is what the law "requires" for sinners, and yes, it was fully and unquestionably realized on Good Friday. But that does not sound like what the sentence above wants to be saying, as the followings sentences show.

"His righteousness covers our sin, when we become one with him by faith, but at the same time, he lives in us, which means that righteousness dwells in us, alive and triumphant, and we begin to live a new kind of life."

Careful here. Just what IS "his righteousness"? According to

Pauline witness (and not only Paul) the “covering” is not Christ’s moral achievement to cover our moral failures. The big “cover” is not a cover of our sin, but a cover of us sinners—“covering” our death sentence for us. Yes, this does come “by faith,” but, once more, the first event of that faith’s “oneness with Christ” is that our death-sentence is swapped with the one whom we trust. The first step “when we become one with him by faith” is that “We have been buried with him by baptism into his death.” It’s the Good Friday connection.

When he then “lives in us,” it is not his ethical-righteousness (he did everything that God’s commandments call for) that inhabits us, but Christ’s Good Friday/Easter righteousness, aka Gospel-righteousness. When “we begin to live a new kind of life,” it is really BRAND NEW. It is NOT that we now succeed in law-righteousness where we’d previously failed. But BRAND NEW in that it is in a different category, from a different source, with a different mindset—a different reality—from any and all law-righteousness.

In the rhetoric of Romans 8, it comes with the “mindset” of God’s Spirit, not the mindset of God’s law. With Christ as Lord and Master and being led by the Spirit, where is there any need for recurring to Moses’ rubrics for righteousness? If so, for what? What is incomplete about the Gospel’s double gift (Christ and the Spirit, 2 Cor.3:17) for “living the new kind of life” that Moses and the law could even supply? Mt. Sinai is clueless about the new righteousness that got hammered out on Mt. Calvary.

“But if the gospel bestows what the law demands, then without agreeing substantially on what the law demands, we cannot agree on what the gospel bestows.”

The premise in the first half of the sentence is untenable. It

implies the same “substance” for both God’s law and God’s gospel. According to Romans 8 that’s the equivalent of saying death and life are synonyms. There might be a smidgin of truth in the second half of the sentence. At least if reworded to this extent: Until we see what the law REALLY demands—i.e., the death of the sinner as its primary demand—and understand the commandments as God’s “addendum” (so Paul claims) to hold this death-demand in front of our nose—then no matter what we might agree upon with reference to the Gospel, it makes little difference, since it won’t address the law’s ominous “justification” awaiting all of us.

“And pushed to the end, such disagreement will easily turn into disagreement about Jesus Christ and his saving righteousness.”

That is indeed where many denominations are today—ELCA included. Disagreement about Jesus Christ and his saving work. But that’s not where we “will easily” wind up. Isn’t this already the elephant in the living room? We are already “pushed to the end.” And grim as those words may sound, that could indeed be a very good thing. Back to square one. Just what IS the Good News about Jesus Christ and his saving righteousness? According to Article X of the Formula of Concord it sure looks like we are in a *tempus confessionis*, a time for confessing. American Lutheranism could do worse than go to work today on a formula of concord. Just what is the Good News about Jesus Christ and his saving righteousness?

And it’s not just us USA Lutherans with this elephant in our living room as we seek to be Lutherans persisting. At the big Lutheran World Federation gathering in Augsburg, Germany, just one year ago this very week, that was the sub-text throughout. Just what is the saving work of Jesus Christ? In other words, just what IS the Christian Gospel? It never succeeded in getting direct attention at Augsburg 2009, but was addressed constantly

in the Kaffeeklatsches. At Augsburg 1530 it was front and center. [For ThTh reports on Augsburg 2009 GO to: <https://crossings.org/thursday/2009/thur040909.shtml> and <https://crossings.org/thursday/2009/thur042309.shtml>].

If Christ-confessors, Lutherans included, could wrestle that one to the ground—that is, to the original ground from which it once arose—that would be a good thing. Sure, we’ve got trouble. But as Bob Bertram often told us: When trouble comes, don’t let the trouble go to waste. His posthumously published book’s title suggests the way to be Lutherans persisting. It’s “A Time for Confessing.”

Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder

P.S. Come to think of it, next week’s ThTh post, God willing, will speak to this agenda. Scheduled for ThTh 616 is Richard Koenig’s review of John Piper’s book “The Future of Justification. A Response to N.T.Wright.” Piper examines eight of Wright’s “head-turner” claims about justification, one of which is “Justification is not the Gospel.” Stay tuned.

A Book About Forgiveness

Colleagues,

In this week’s ThTh post Marie Schroeder reviews a book about forgiveness. The author, Karl Boehmke, is a member of our Bethel Lutheran congregation here in St. Louis. The first draft of the manuscript was grist for the mill in our Sunday morning Adult Forum discussions. This is a pre-publication review. The book is

officially “out” on Easter Sunday. If you can’t wait till then, Karl has some copies at home.

Peace and joy!

Ed Schroeder

A. Karl Boehmke, FORGIVENESS: NEVER EASY / ALWAYS POSSIBLE.

Minneapolis: Two Harbors Press, 2010.

Paperback. xvii, 236p. \$14.95.

Picture it – a honeymooning second-marriage couple fearful of jeopardizing their second chance finds a haven in a storm, The Inn of Friendships Renewed. It turns out to be a small hotel offering a week-long program of Bible stories on forgiveness told by the owner and staff. The owner’s name is Matthew Levi, and when he tells his New Testament stories the narrative is in the first person. Who is he really? Mystery abounds.

That’s the story around the stories presented by nonagenarian A. Karl Boehmke in his first book, FORGIVENESS: NEVER EASY / ALWAYS POSSIBLE. Boehmke retells some 40 stories he’s chosen from the many he researched in both testaments, and his retellings are lively, pertinent and thought-provoking. Starting with Jesus’ parable of the Wayward Son, the stories backtrack to cover incidents in the Old Testament you might not have thought of as displaying forgiveness – Cain and Abel, David and Bathsheba, Abraham and Lot. Some stories you have probably forgotten, such as the occasion when an invading Syrian army loses its way and heads straight for the Israelite camp, and the king of Israel, in obedience to the prophet Elisha’s words, prepares a feast for them instead of a slaughter and after the meal sends them home in peace.

Further on we hear New Testament stories, and the joyful splashing surrounding John's baptizing of Jesus is worth the price of the book. Later stories center especially around Matthew Levi's first-person narratives of Jesus' teaching his disciples, Jesus' crucifixion, death and resurrection and how that all affected Jesus' followers.

In between we catch glimpses of the reactions of the couple who decide to stay the whole week. They begin to work through the painful divorces they have left behind and eventually discover how this forgiveness idea is the saving grace they need for their new life together.

Boehmke is a pastor through and through, and has served as such in Washington, Detroit, Rochester, Hong Kong, and the Air Force. He has doubtless loved Bible stories since he was a kid. It may well be that he wanted to learn more about them, the "what happened next?" sort of curiosity we may all experience. For Boehmke it was the stories having to do with forgiveness that intrigued him most. It's the heart of the Gospel, the heart so many find missing in their lives. And if the Bible gives only the bare outline, an eager mind will try to fill in the blanks. Boehmke succeeds better than many.

Yet this reviewer missed something here. All this talk of forgiveness turns out not to be enough to guide the followers of Jesus into the future. Matthew Levi reflects that after Jesus' resurrection "Jesus had given us the keys of the Kingdom. Suddenly that commission was coming clear. The Holy Spirit would fill us with wisdom to distinguish right from wrong within the unfolding processes of history. The Torah could be understood as God intended: 'Love the Lord your God, love neighbor as yourself,' twin streams of divine revelation, like the early rains and late, blessing our land and nations beyond. 'Love as I have loved you,' would draw together again souls torn apart by

human frailty.” (p.217)

It seems that Matthew Levi has forgotten what his fellow evangelist John made perfectly clear. Namely, that “Love as I have loved you” is offered by Jesus as his NEW commandment—different from Moses’s “Love God, love your neighbor as yourself.” It’s clearly different in the yardstick for measurement—“as you love yourself” vs. “as I have loved you.” If Jesus himself is the new yardstick for love, then the Torah’s double-love-commandment has been trumped with a better one. Isn’t this where the Holy Spirit was leading the disciples?

Again, when the missionary Paul visits Matthew Levi’s original inn in Shechem, he says he tells Jews and Gentiles alike that they can be friends with God again. “But what about the Torah?” Matthew Levi asks him. “These many cultures differ so drastically from our own Jewish ways.” Paul replies, “They hear as their ears and the Holy Spirit allow them to hear. The big, bold Ten Commandments always stand up front. Beyond that, the Holy Spirit helps people work out laws for living together in each place...” (p.228-9)

Does this really sound like Paul? The Ten Commandments “always standing up front”? Is this the same Paul who more memorably said, for instance, “You have died to the law through the body of Christ” (Rom.7:4), “you are not under law but under grace” (Rom.6:14), or even “we are discharged from the law.” (Rom.7:6) One senses an argument from Matthew Levi here for the third use of the law, instead of the second use of the Gospel, and Thursday Theology readers may recall discussion on this topic often enough in former postings.

Nevertheless it’s still a good read, and revisiting these stories of forgiveness can be helpful indeed.

On the same weekend when I finished Boehmke’s book our St. Louis

newspaper featured on the front page a remarkable story. A few years ago a teenager swiped a tip jar from a local Starbucks counter. Another man tried to stop him but fell outside on the parking lot and inadvertently the teenager's car ran over him. The man died two days later. Now 21 years old, having been convicted and having served his time in prison, this young man was invited by the relatives of the victim to return to that very parking lot to plant a tree in the victim's memory. Fearful, he did drive up from Atlanta with his father, not knowing what sort of reception he would find. Bitterness? Hatred? When they arrived, every member of the victim's family, even his brothers, hugged the young man and his father and said they were so glad they came. Tears flowed freely. Everyone there, including the young man, helped scatter the victim's ashes under the tree. "It's about reconciliation," said the father.

You'd think they might have been reading Boehmke's book.

Marie Schroeder

St. Louis, MO

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Surprising Things Happen! A Quartet of Surprises at Mid-Lent 2010

Colleagues,

"Surprising things happen!" That was our pastor's refrain in his

midweek Lenten homily last evening. He claimed that he got it from the OT reading for this past Sunday, Isaiah 55:1-9. Here the prophet reports on God's own call to his depressed, repressed, and suppressed exiles in Babylon to come to a banquet. In the midst of exile, a lavish party? God, you've got to be kidding! "Not so, for my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways, my ways." Surprising things can happen—and they do. For God "keeps" covenant—mercy, abundant pardon—even when we don't. Surprise, surprise!

It's a bit of a long segue perhaps from that to what follows, but four surprises came my way this past week—not unrelated to that super-surprise of mercy mentioned above.

Surprise Number One came just minutes before we left home for the Wednesday evening Lenten liturgy. It was an e-mail from "our overseas pastor and wife" in a mostly Muslim nation.

"I had the most amazing dream," our Arabic tutor exclaimed as she walked into class the morning after Ash Wednesday. She is usually businesslike about our Arabic studies, but this was quite personal, and we wondered what she was going to say.

"In my dream I had Jesus in my room, and I was protecting him from the Jews. They were banging at my door, and they were saying, 'Give us Jesus,' but I kept saying, 'You can't have him. He's not in here.'"

"But he was. Jesus was lying on my bed, as if he were dead. But he couldn't have been dead. Of course, he wasn't dead! But he looked like he was dead."

Here she reflected a common Muslim belief that Jesus did not die on the cross, but was taken up to heaven.

Witnessing to Muslims is against the law in this country, and transgressors can be imprisoned or deported, so I was limited in what I could say. I decided to venture a modest first response: "This is a very special dream, and on the night of Ash Wednesday, no less! You must write it down!"

Our tutor continued, "Jesus just lay there on my bed, and beside him lay the book of the Gospel, and it was glowing with light."

Muslims think of the Gospel as a single book revealed to Jesus from heaven but corrupted by Christians. They normally are not encouraged or even permitted to read it for this reason. The Qur'an, on the other hand, is everywhere present and popularly pictured as glowing.

"I was there by the body of Jesus, and I was putting dates around it," our tutor said. "He sort of flickered his eyes open, and he looked over at me, and he offered me one of the dates." At this point I ventured my second appreciative response. I said to her, "You were so much like the women at the tomb when they came to take care of Jesus' body. You in your Middle Eastern dress remind me exactly of them!" [She is what she calls a religious Muslim, wearing a face veil and long sleeves and dress. We have seen only her eyes.] "You were just like the women at Jesus' grave!" I said again. "You must write it down!"

In the ensuing conversation, I told her that I was getting ready to preach in chapel that morning, and that I would be sharing the Gospel. "Well, you tell them about this!" she urged. I had prepared a serious Lenten meditation on Romans 5:12-19, but this was too much. It was almost as if God himself had given this Lenten dream to a dear one outside his fold, and wanted it known. So, before I entered the pulpit, I felt I had to tell the story of our Arabic tutor and her dream. A week later she was still in the students' prayer concerns.

Muslims all over the world by the thousands are having dreams of Jesus, according to our visiting professor who has been lecturing these past three weeks. We heard of imams in Cameroon twenty years ago for whom this occurred, and it hasn't stopped. This Lenten season we invite you to pray for God's dear ones of Muslim faith who are dreaming of their Lord. Ask God that the living Christ might reveal himself to them in this and other ways. And ask God that we Christians might be ready to be faithful interpreters of dreams when the moment comes. What will you say?

A blessed Lenten season to you all.

Sincerely in Christ,

Your Overseas Pastor and Wife

Surprise Number Two was having in hand Vilmos Vajta's book, LUTHER ON WORSHIP. It was a first edition hard cover published in 1958. [Guess what the inside dust jacket listed as the price. \$3.50!] Vajta was a Hungarian Lutheran who because of the exigencies of W.W.II did his theological study—and doctorate—in Sweden. He was, I think, the first Director of the Department of Theology of the Lutheran World Federation.

Vajta wrote the book in German. [For a Hungarian, now a Swedish citizen, what else would you expect!]. Ulrich S. Leupold, Canadian Lutheran liturgical scholar of the last century, did the English translation. In the book Vajta chronicles the consequences for worship that Luther drew from the Augsburg Aha! If you're involved in the ongoing hassle about worship these days, this is a must read. Wipf and Stock Publishers reprinted it (2004), but now you'll have to fork over \$19.20 (web price).

As a tease, here's his last Luther citation on the last page.

*“Thank God, in our churches we are able to exhibit to a Christian the true Christian mass, according to the command and institution of Christ and in accordance with the sense of Christ and the church. Here comes to the altar our minister, bishop, or parish pastor who was rightly, openly, and publicly called and who before by baptism was consecrated, anointed, and born again a priest of Christ that needs no sectarian unction [Winkel Cresem].”*Clearly and publicly, he chants the Words of Institution, takes bread and wine, gives thanks, and imparts them to us who are waiting to commune by virtue of the word of Christ: ‘This is my body. This is my blood. This do, etc.’ And we, that is, those who want to commune, are kneeling there beside, behind, and around him, men and women, young and old, master and servant, mistress and maid, parent and children, gathered by God, all of us true and holy co-priests, sanctified by the blood of Christ and by baptism anointed and consecrated.

“Here we are in our indigenous, hereditary, priestly honor and ornament, have (as described in Rev. 4) our golden crowns on our heads, harps in our hands, and golden vials full of incense, and we have our pastor proclaim the Word of Christ, but not for himself or for his own person. He is the mouthpiece for all of us, and in our hearts and with steadfast faith we all, with him, address the Lamb who is for us and with us and gives us his body and blood according to his own institution. This is our mass, the true mass which will never fail us.” –WA 38, 247

Surprise Number Three was Matthew Bear, chair of our congregation’s worship committee, informing me that way back in 1652 Jakob Fabricius [=Latinized rendering of Schmidt!], a Pomeranian Lutheran pastor and hymn-writer, turned the 28 articles of the Augsburg Confession into a 28-verse hymn. In

just four rhymed lines per confessional article (to the tune of “Now Thank We All Our God”) he did a shrink-lit rhymed rendering of the whole thing, from Article 1, the Triune God, to Article 28, The Authority of Bishops.

Matthew Carver has tried his hand at rendering Fabricius’ 28 stanzas into English. You can find it all, Carver’s English and Fabricius’s original, at this URL: <http://matthaeusglyptes.blogspot.com/2010/02/gott-vater-sohn-und-geist.html>

Here’s a sample, the fundamental Article IV Justification.

Fabricius

4. Kein Mensch ist nach dem Fall, der dürffte sich verlassen
Auff eigner Werk Verdienst, er muß im Glauben fassen,
Was Christus hat gethan, Der uns bey G0tt versühnt,
Und leben hat und Gnad durch Seinen Tod verdient.

Carver

4. No human since the fall,
Thus dead in sin unsightly,
Can trust his worthless works.
By faith he must cling tightly
To what Christ Jesus did,
Who reconciled our race
To God, and by His death
Earned us both life and grace.

Go and enjoy the other 27—and don’t miss the “footnote” verse 29 that Fabricius adds at the end.

Surprise Number Four was also about justification, namely, a fifty-year-old essay [Una Sancta 17, Easter 1960] by Bob Schultz, “Baptism and Justification.” It surfaced, of all

places, at St. Louis University, a Jesuit institution, this past Friday. [Quick background: Fred Danker and I show up for a noon brown-bag seminar with the Jesuits regularly on Fridays during the academic term. The discussion focuses on an essay that the SLU theology department is considering for publication in its journal, Theology Digest. Last Friday's essay was on justification, commemorating the tenth anniversary of the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification, signed off in Augsburg a decade ago by the Vatican's chief ecumenical officer and the president of the Lutheran World Federation.]

Bob Schultz's discovery of fifty years ago got into the discussion: Justification had a very different meaning in the sixteenth century. Here's what he found:

"We use 'justify' to mean a man has excused himself or, passively, that a man has been excused. Either he has not really done anything wrong or he was not responsible for what he did. Transferred into the language of the courtroom it means that a man is acquitted. Thus a man accused of a crime may 'justify' himself by proving that he did not do it or that he is not responsible for having done it. One thing is clear: the man who has not done anything at all is the man who finds it easiest to justify himself in court." This modern usage of the word 'justification' has little relationship to the sense in which this word is used in Lutheran theology. Here the word is used to describe what happens to the man who is a sinner. He is not innocent; he is guilty. The man who is justified by faith has both done that which the law condemns and is responsible for having done it. . . .

"From the later Middle Ages until the seventeenth century [justification] is used [for] the entire process of trial, examination by torture, and execution of the condemned criminal. This is the picture which the word 'justification'

produced in the minds of Luther's hearers. . . .

"Elert offers a number of examples to illustrate this usage. The Diet of Augsburg of 1530 at which the Augsburg Confession was read and presented did not only discuss theology. It also discussed and adopted the reform of the penal code proposed by Emperor Charles V. The proposed code contains the word 'justification' ten times. In some of these instances it refers to the entire trial of the accused, including the examination by torture or the ordeal. In these cases it is theoretically possible that the accused would be found either guilty or innocent.

"It is, however, a peculiarity of the legal language of the time that the word 'justification' is no longer used whenever it becomes clear that the accused is innocent. For 'justification' carries with it the sense of guilt and execution and is used three times in this sense in the code of Charles V. Typical of this usage is the rule that the accused is to be allowed three days to consider his sins, to mourn, and to go to the confession before he is 'justified.'"

So what does it mean to be "justified by faith"? Answer: To have your death sentence carried out by being connected to Christ. Connected to Christ means dying AND RISING with him! That's the cosmic difference between being "justified" by law and being "justified" by faith, the difference between a dead sinner and a resurrected one.

What a concept for the middle of Lent!

Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder

Part Two of “Werner Elert and Moral Decay in the ELCA!”

Colleagues,

Here are some response that have come in after last week's Part One on the topic above.

A. ELCA pastor I read Root's piece [in the blog] and some of the responses to it earlier this week, and my sneaking suspicion is that Root is headed to where the Roman Catholics have always been regarding the Reformation “aha” (including, in my opinion, in the JDDJ) [=Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification] saying, “yes, but.”

Yes, Justification by faith, but, it can't be “only faith.” That's not enough, or it's too easy. You also need something else, or people won't behave. So it is with others who bemoan the ELCA supposed departure from the “Great Tradition” of the Christian Church (which, as far as I can tell, subsists solely in unswerving opposition to homosexuality).

B. ELCA pastor It seems to me that the critics of Elert are ironically critics of Lutheranism. The heart of Lutheranism IS justification. Roman Catholics, I am told, see justification as one of many doctrines, not the central one. To claim that Elert is monomaniacal re justification is actually a compliment. It points to his Lutheranism. On the other hand, it seems that those who see gnosticism and dare I say, antinomianism, in Elert are

actually siding with Roman Catholic natural law and ethics.

C. ELCA layman. I see the villainization of Elert as hope. For a few reasons: if people like Benne are laying out Elert as a misleading force within Lutheranism, those who fundamentally disagree with Benne are going to be way more likely to want to learn about who Elert was and what he thought. If anything, he (and people like him) are trying to impose Elert on those elements of the ELCA they don't like. Good for him! If our attempts to talk about what Elert contributed to Lutheranism fall on deaf ears, maybe they'll be more likely listen when he's pulled out as a potential strawman for their arguments. The enemy of my enemy is my friend and all that. I think it's also good that people like Benne recognize Elert as a problem to their theology. This bit from Benne illustrates his chilling outline of what Lutheranism ought to be like (and how they're going to do CORE right):

They cannot reconcile Elert with their views, so they must reject him. At least on some level, they DO understand Elert, even though they identify him with an incorrect view of Lutheranism—one that makes biblicism untenable.

D. ELCA pastor After reading what Benne and Root said, I am driven down with sorrow. Root is a fine man with whom I have had some really good moments. Benne is, well, Benne, but he means well. I respected them both. But they are now revealed as following the pattern of Bill Lazareth [1928 – 2008], old LCA-types who can't get Law out of their heads. I wonder how it turned out that we ended up where we are in the ELCA.

So much from last week's responses.

At the end of last week's ThTh post I told you about another Elert-critic, Robert Benne (like Root an ELCA major leaguer),

and his article in the current number of Lutheran Forum. In this article Benne even mentions my name as another subversive infecting the ELCA with what he calls "Elert's gravely flawed construal of Luther and Lutheranism."

And at the very very end I gave you a riddle:

"For next week's ThTh, more on Benne's article, wherein I intend (in a sidebar) to identify the primal "villain" who brought Elert into 20th century American Lutheranism. Was not Forde, nor me, but ironically a bloke who once taught at Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary in Columbia, South Carolina, the very same ELCA seminary were two of the most vociferous Elert-critics are now tenured profs." Who is that mystery man?

Answer: It is Robert C. Schultz. And the grey eminence behind Schultz is Jaroslav J. Pelikan. If it hadn't been for Pelikan, Elert would never have gotten to America! If it hadn't been for Pelikan, Bob Schultz would never have gone to Erlangen to do a doctorate under Elert beginning in 1952. Here's how that computes. Pelikan taught at Concordia Seminary (St.Louis) for only two—possibly three—years (1950 to 52, or maybe 53). Schultz's last year at Concordia (1951-52) was one of those Pelikan years. Schultz, along with the rest of us, got exposed to Pelikan's hype for Elert and his recommendation that if we were thinking about graduate school in systematic theology and were serious about Lutheran confessional theology, we would, of course, first have to learn German and then we should go to Erlangen and listen to Elert. Why Elert? Because he was the doyen of Lutheran confessional theology and he did NOT have the Missouri Synod hang-up of verbal inspiration.

Schultz, pious LCMS lad, obedient to his teachers—especially such a super-teacher as Pelikan—received his B.D. degree in '52, finessed a scholarship and went to Erlangen to sit at Elert's

feet. Four years later (1956), and now be-doctored, Bob is looking for work. O.P.Kretzmann, president of Valparaiso University, having discovered Schultz at Erlangen during his own junket to Germany in the summer of 1953, hires Bob to come and teach the Lutheran confessional theology he's learned at Erlangen (without the verbal inspiration hang-up!)-to the (mostly "Missouri") undergraduates at Valpo.

But Bob doesn't confine his activity to the classroom. No shrinking violet, and conscious of the tiger now in his tank-especially within American Lutheranism-he also starts publishing in English what he's learned in German wherever he gets a chance. He hustles up a "Walther-renaissance" in the LCMS focused on that Missouri Synod patriarch's own book on Law and Gospel, which book Bob Bertram's grandfather W.H.T.Dau had put into English. And somewhere along the line at Valpo Bob is asked to create the prototype of a theology curriculum for college students, wherein law-gospel-hermeneutics would not only be taught to freshman(!) for how to read the Bible, but would also be put to use as the "chromosomal structure" [thank you, Oswald Bayer, for that term] for doing theology across the board-also ethics!

And thus unwittingly the Crossings Community was born.

So there you have it, ELCA Elert-critics. The names in the rogues gallery that you need to go after begin with Bob Schultz. But behind him in this cabal are significant others: Pelikan, Kretzmann, Walther, Bertram's grandfather, Bertram himself. Bob Schultz is the only one still alive. So you better hurry up. Last month he turned 82.

Schultz was not universally acclaimed-to put it mildly-in the LCMS. Nor was Valpo's theology department. After some "unpleasantness," Bob moved into the LCA and eventually was

asked to join the faculty at Lutheran Southern Theological Seminary, where some of you unhappy campers now teach. Perhaps it's Elertiana still in the woodwork at LSTS that triggers your dismay. Possibly also in some of the alumni.

After that sortie to round up the (un)usual suspects, let's turn to Robert Benne's article. It comes in three sections. In the second of three he goes after Elert. Here's the full text of that section. The bracketed numbers indicate places where I have something to say after you've read Benne's prose.

THE HAZARDS OF LUTHERAN DISTINCTIVES [1]

By Robert Benne

LUTHERAN FORUM (winter 2009) pp. 45-48.

[Section II, pp.47-48]

A Lutheran temptation has been to take the "doctrine upon which the church stands or falls"—justification—as the only doctrine that the church has. [2] The doctrine of the justification of sinners on account of Christ has often been elevated so far above [3] the doctrines of God the Father and God the Holy Spirit that Lutherans have sometimes justly been charged with "christomonism." Such a Second Article reductionism marginalizes [4] the role of God the Father – the creating, sustaining, covenant-making, commandment-giving, judging, first person of the Trinity – and of God the Holy Spirit – the third person of the Trinity Who calls and sustains the church, brings us to repentance and grace, joins us to the Body of Christ, gives us purpose, and sanctifies both the church and Christian persons. Without the full trinitarian content of the faith, justification easily leads to cheap grace and antinomianism, if not to total unintelligibility. [5]

This Lutheran tendency to absolutize justification has not leaped into our theology overnight. The existentialist reading of Luther led in that direction, strengthened by a certain contempt among German Lutheran theologians for the Old

Testament. [6]

“Partly by historical romancing, partly, and even worse, by following certain secular and especially nationalistic moods and tendencies, a type of “Calvinism” and “Lutheranism” was conjured up which secretly at first, but later quite explicitly, was very different from anything that Calvin and Luther and the old Calvinists and Lutherans ever have dreamt of (except perhaps in occasional nightmares).” –Karl Barth, Church Dogmatic 1:2, 836-837.

Was Barth talking about Werner Elert, [7] the great Erlangen theological ethicist, whose writings exerted the most important influence on Concordia Theological Seminary students in the years prior to the “Great Unpleasantness”? So avers Gregory Fryer, [8] a learned ELCA pastor in Manhattan, who has written a marvelous treatise [9] the sources of ELCA antinomianism. Fryer argues that Elert had a particular – and gravely flawed – construal of Luther and Lutheranism that heavily influenced the post-1970s generation of Missouri Synod refugees who are now in positions of ecclesial and theological leadership in the ELCA. [10] The essence of that construal was an almost monomaniacal focus on justification, to the exclusion of other crucial Christian doctrines.[11]

Elert’s method began with the ‘Urerlebnis’ (primal experience) of dread before God, not necessarily because of one’s sins but because of the nature of God and His commandments. Standing before God leads to “the dread one has when in the night suddenly two demonic eyes stare at him – eyes which paralyze him into immobility and fill him with the certainty that these are the eyes of him who will kill you in this very hour.” –Werner Elert, *The Structure of Lutheranism*, 20.

Who is this horrible killer? It is the one who puts humans under

obligation but then binds their wills so they cannot do what is commanded. It is God! [12]

“Only when man can no longer be in doubt as to the mysterious power that binds him unconditionally and therefore keeps him from doing what he should does this knowledge become terrible in full measure. It is God himself.” –Ibid., 22. [13]“God creates man in such a way that he is able to fight against Him, yes, to hate Him for placing man in such a gruesome condition. As a result, God Himself must reply to this with death and destruction.” –Ibid., 32. [14]

Ah, but then there is the wonderful news of the gospel. The unmerited free grace of Christ frees us from this terrible God and His commandments. [15] Such is the rationale that can lead Edward Schroeder (a chief articulator of the Elertian heritage) to argue that once the gospel releases us we can freely say goodbye to the moral structures of the law that bore down on us so malevolently.[16] Thus, he argues that the created structures that augur for heterosexual marriage can be transcended by the freedom granted to us by the gospel. [17] It enables us to say farewell to bondage to the law both as accuser AND as guide.[18]

The newly-appointed Sexuality Statement exhibits this kind of Lutheran antinomianism. (It should be noted that elite Lutherans are only antinomian with regard to personal life, where biblical commandments are relatively clear; but with regard to social and political ethics, where it is notoriously difficult to gain any sort of Christian consensus, they claim clear perception of God’s will.) The statement signals that the only unity we need concerns justification. Issues having to do with the commandments of God the Father or the Holy Spirit’s work in us so that we might “delight in His will and walk in His ways” are secondary. Disagreement about them ought not to be church-

dividing. [19]

The Statement wipes out any real role for the law of God, either as the divine commands that demand repentance or as the guide for a godly life. [20] It denies the lawful forms given by God to marriage, to the complementarity of the sexes, and to the family. Because of the statement's incoherence, it is difficult to discern whether such lawlessness and formlessness are conjured up as a strategy to make homosexual relationships morally licit, or whether there is an underlying Elertian theological ethic at work. [21] In any case, the effect is the same. There is reason to suspect that the Book of Faith initiative may well be used to push forward a "distinctively" Lutheran hermeneutic, that is, one in which justification is the only crucial message of Scripture. [22]

There are other Lutheran distinctives that are subversive if accentuated at the expense of other Christian perspectives. [23] Sole emphasis on the law / gospel dialectic mutes the role of the Holy Spirit. [24] "Simul justus et peccator" is another Lutheran distinctive that can become hazardous. [25] If that profound doctrine gives permission to become complacent in recurring and habitual sins, its accentuation diminishes the Christian life. Lutheran Christians should be able to wrestle more vigorously with specific sins – lust, gluttony, judgmentalism, pride – than our tradition has allowed. [26] Such a struggle could lead to progress in the Christian life, [27] a notion seemingly abhorrent to Lutherans. [28]

Some thoughts about Benne's text

1. The one thing "distinctive" about their confession, said the Augsburg Confessors, was the way they read the Bible, namely, their law/promise hermeneutic (as we'd label it today).. Article

4 of the Apology makes that point in responding to the first wave of criticism that came from papal theologians. The alternative “distinctive,” they said was to read the Bible with God’s law dominating everything so that in the end the promise got lost. By using that distinctive law/promise way of reading the Bible, justification by faith alone popped up from the pages. Luther says the same thing in his famous TableTalk # 5518. The “Aha!” came when he learned to “discriminate”(his actual Latin term) between law and gospel. From that discrimination “faith-alone” righteousness followed.

2. The one and only doctrine.

My first seminary course in the Lutheran Confessions was taught by Pelikan. He drummed home to us the significance of the singular noun in the expression “doctrina evangelii” (the doctrine of the gospel) in Augsburg Confession, Article 7. He told us: There is only one doctrine in the Christian faith according to the AC, the “doctrina” (teaching) that IS the “evangel,” the Good News. So why then 28 individual articles in the AC? These 28 articles “articulate” (pun intended from the Latin meaning of articulus, “joint”) the connection, the joining, of that one doctrina to the various topics in Christian discourse.

In our LCMS tradition we’d learned to organize doctrines linearly. First in line was the verbally inspired Bible, then God, then creation, then anthropology, then sin . . . and so on. A clothesline model for understanding all the Bible doctrines. Note the plural, doctrines. Not so the AC. The AC works with a circle. Think of an old wagon wheel. The center, the hub is The Gospel: sinners being rescued by trusting the crucified and risen Jesus. In shorthand “justification by faith alone.” A wheel has only one hub. The 28 articles of the AC are spokes of the wheel. Each one articulates the “joint” between

the gospel hub and a specific topic of Christian faith and life. So, even on the topic of “sin,” says the AC, when you talk about sin you must speak of it in this way in order not to lose the Gospel. Any spoke of “sin-talk” that cannot be grounded back into the Gospel hub is off-limits for Christian theology. Ditto for the spokes of good works, church, sacraments, church government, etc.

[The 28 articles of the AC are often single brief paragraphs and the “joint” between spoke and hub is not spelled out. But when you get to the Apology, where the confessors had to defend what they said in the AC, that spoke-and=hub item is THE agenda. “Here’s how this spoke fits into the doctrina evangelii hub. AND here’s how your spoke does not.”]

3. Not “far above,” just at the center. The hub of the wheel. Possibly even better, the axle on which the entire wheel of theology turns.

4. How could hyping this one doctrine, this Christic salvation center, “marginalize” the Trinity? This doctrina is the Trinity’s project, the opus proprium of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Such a charge sounds like linear theology again—each of many doctrines getting their fair share of attention. What does it mean to give “fair share” of attention to each of many doctrines? Doesn’t such theology run on an axle different from the one “doctrina evangelii”? To see how Luther articulates the “Trinity-spoke” when it’s grounded in the Gospel-hub we need to go to the Large Catechism in the Lutheran Confessions, to its section on the Creed. There Luther articulates a trinitarian theology grounded in the Gospel. His proposal: Here’s how Christians talk about the Triune God so that it comes out as Good News.

5. “The full trinitarian content of the faith.” I wonder what

that full content might be. What might there be to trusting the trinity that goes beyond the justification hub? Is there more promise, different promise, than the Trinity's promise offered in this alleged "Christocentric monism"? Are there additional doctrines that we MUST believe?.

6. "This Lutheran tendency to absolutize justification" did not come from "existentialist reading of Luther" nor from "contempt among German Lutheran theologians for the Old Testament." It comes from the Augsburg Confession and Apology with its law/promise hermeneutic which leads to the one doctrina evangelii as the absolute center. I wonder who those unnamed bad guys are. But whoever they are, they are not at fault. It is the Augsburg Confessors who are at fault. Is their confession faulty? Within hours after they originally presented it in 1530, there were many who said so.

7. Elert and Barth were contemporaries (born in 1885 and 1886, respectively) and constant critics of each other's view on law and Gospel. The Barth citation above is probably directed against Elert. But for Barth to say that Elert's "'Lutheranism' . . . was very different from anything that . . . Luther . . . ever dreamt of (except perhaps in occasional nightmares)," reflects Barth's own nightmare about Luther. He claimed over and over again that Luther had gotten Law and Gospel wrong. He wrote a whole book about it. It should be Gospel first, said Barth, and then, after the Gospel has rescued us, we can finally fulfill God's law. Barth's proposed sequence would give Luther nightmares because here God's law has the last word.

8. "Elert . . . exerted the most important influence on Concordia Theological Seminary students in the years prior to the 'Great Unpleasantness'? So avers Gregory Fryer." Not true. The young exegetes with their Harvard Ph.D's were all the rage. Theirs was the "most important" influence I know. I was there.

Systematic theology was second string—if even that—and Elert not the major voice.

9. I have a copy of Fryer's 289-page treatise. It is not marvelous. It is gravely flawed in what it presents as Elert's theology. It begins by reporting on three of Fryer's neighboring ELCA pastors in the Metro New York synod, all of them Seminex alumni. "All three are antinomians. They learned it from Elert at Seminex. I'll now show you." What he then seeks to show us is that his heroes, Piepkorn and Jenson, are creedal catholic theologians and Elert is not, and the end product is antinomianism. What more needs to be said?

10. "Elert . . . heavily influenced the post-1970s generation of Missouri Synod refugees who are now in positions of ecclesial and theological leadership in the ELCA." Where are those Elert-tainted leaders? One ELCA seminary president is a Seminex grad (possibly more a Bonhoefferian than an Elertian), and over the years several have been elected ELCA bishops in local synods. But I'm still waiting for the first publication coming from the ELCA headquarters on Higgins Rd.—from any department there—where you can sniff any essence d'Elert. The long string of publications from the sexuality study group contradicted Elert's ethics hip and thigh—even and especially when they tried to talk law and gospel. More than once I sent in Elertiana alternatives to that group and was finally instructed to hold my peace.

11. Elert's "gravely flawed construal of Luther and Lutheranism . . . the essence of that construal was an almost monomaniacal focus on justification, to the exclusion of other crucial Christian doctrines." Benne takes Fryer's verdict and makes it his own. Those are hefty charges. But are they true? Perhaps there IS monomania in the works here, but it's not on Elert's side.

Gravely flawed because of his “almost” monomaniacal focus on justification. How much monomania is “almost” monomaniacal? How much, how little, focus on justification is the right amount to avoid monomania? Is the AC also “almost monomaniacal” with its claim that there is only one doctrina, justification sola fide, in the whole of Christian theology? Was Pelikan also a madman to call this to our attention way back then?

Seems to me that Elert’s alleged “construal” is no more monomaniacal than St. Paul was when “most excellent Festus” called him a maniac way at the end of the Book of Acts? “You are mad, Paul.” (The Greek word is “maniac.”) Paul’s rejoinder about his own justification-monomania is encouraging: “I am not out of my mind, most excellent Festus, but I am speaking the sober truth.” Perhaps the debate with Elert’s critics is simply this, a debate with the Augsburg Confession and its claim that justification by faith alone is the one single “doctrina evangelii.” Is that madness or is it the sober truth?

And then the absurd charge that Elert’s monomania leads to his “excluding other crucial (sic!) Christian doctrines”? Did Benne or Fryer ever look at Elert’s textbook on Christian doctrine [The Christian Faith, 1940] running 679 pages? [Bob Schultz and I (Dick Baepler too) heard it delivered “live” 57 years ago at Erlangen University.] The table of contents lists individual chapters on 18 major doctrinal topics with 94 sub-sections. I wonder what the “grave flaw” is in this textbook, which then led Elert to the “exclusion of other crucial Christian doctrines.” To call Elert monomaniacal is an ad hominem argument. To say he excludes crucial Christian doctrines is an argument from ignorance.

12, 13, 14. Here Elert is repeating (almost verbatim) Luther’s own words in his classic treatise on the Bondage of the Will in his debate with Erasmus. The tone of ridicule surfaces, so it

seems to me, in Benne's prose here. In a similar way Erasmus ridiculed Luther's proposal in this treatise that there is "no exit" from the wrath of God until Christ enters the scene. So Luther or Erasmus—who was speaking the sober truth?

15. It's hard for me not to read these words as continuing ridicule, making Christ's rescue of sinners from the wrath of God sound "almost" facetious. And then to conclude that Christ's entry into the scene (ala Elert) "frees us from God's commandments" is not only a non-sequitur, but a flat-out contradiction to what Elert says in his ethics book. However, by mentioning God's commandments at this point, Benne is possibly tipping his hand. Is he heading where that pastor above commented—"can't get the Law out of their heads." It finally has the last word.

16, 17, 18. What Benne says in these three sentences is untrue in every case. He is (unwittingly, I hope) bearing false witness against me. I have never "argued" for the homosexual cause by any of these lines of reasoning that he predicates to me. He could not possibly have gotten to these conclusions from anything I have written or said on the subject. I wonder where he got the data that he puts into my mouth. What I have said on the topic is spelled out in an essay on the Crossings web site titled: "Reformation Resources: Law/Promise Hermeneutics & the Godly Secularity of Sex." My argument for God's own affirmation of homosexuals is based on God's law, not Christ's Gospel. The law of creation. Yes, I did come to understand that law of creation from Elert. He showed me how he had learned it from Luther's scriptural understanding of God's work as creator. At [18] Benne once more tips his hand. He desires the law to be retained as "guide" for the Christian life. It's the old debate on "third use of the law." Benne's for it. I'm against it. Luther was against it too. Ditto for St. Paul and St. John. Main reason for rejecting the law as guide for Christ-trusters is

that with the Gospel you get a “guide,” qualitatively different from Moses, for living the life of faith. That new guide Christ himself as Lord and his Holying Spirit as advocate. “I am with you always,” Jesus says, not Moses. To backslide to Moses for Christian ethics is also to slide away from Christ. That’s what Paul had to tell the Galatians.

19, 20, 21. The Sexuality Statement is not good Lutheran theology in my judgment. But its serious defects are not the ones that vex Benne. It is the absence of a Lutheran theology of creation that Elert would point to as its major defect, not its attempt to ground sexual ethics from the Gospel—which is bad indeed. But to suggest that there may be an “Elertian theological ethic at work here,” when this statement ignores/contradicts what Elert sees as fundamental in “ethics under God’s law,” is to be clueless about Elert’s theological ethic and how it “works.”

22. The continuing complaint about “justification [as] the only crucial message of Scripture” surfaces again. Someone should organize a conference, an old-fashioned Reformation-era disputation, with Bob Benne and Bob Schultz as the disputants.

Thesis: The Gospel of justification by faith alone is the one and only “doctrina” in Christian theology.

Benne: That is the key problem in the ELCA.

Schultz: That is the solution to the key problem in the ELCA.

I’d gladly pay my own way to attend that one.

23. Distinctives again. See [1] above.

24. Luther said just the opposite. So did Augsburg. So does John’s Gospel. The Holy Spirit is the primal “Christ-pusher,” the prime mover in “Christum treiben.” When you do not operate

“solely” with law/promise hermeneutics (so says Apology IV), you inevitably wind up “pushing” some “other gospel” with law at its base, thus thwarting the primal agenda of the Holy Spirit.

25, 26, 27. Benne’s caveats about “Simul justus et peccator” echo the Roman Catholic unhappiness with this Lutheran claim that the sinner never disappears in the earthly biography of every Christ-truster. The folks responding to last week’s ThTh post and quoted way at the beginning of this post—A), B), and D)—detected this in Michael Root’s message.

Roman theologians were unhappy with the sola fide of the AC for the same reasons, the same reasons that Benne cites as his own: “gives permission to become complacent in recurring and habitual sins.” He’s looking for “progress in the Christian life . . .to wrestle more vigorously with specific sins – lust, gluttony, judgmentalism, pride.”

Two items give pause here: the notion of progress, the focus on sins and not sin itself. The Roman critics of the Aug. Conf. found the AC defective in these two points as well. Their proposal was to reinvigorate the law and its commandments. How far from that is Benne’s prose? When the Apology takes up this criticism, it shows that the proposals of these initial critics do not fit into the hub of the wheel of the one doctrina evangelii. Curiously enough—though perhaps not curious at all—much of the 60 pages of the Apology’s article 4 on Justification is actually spent on ethics. For that was the Roman complaint: no notion of ethical progress, no restrictions to prevent complacency about habitual sins.

Apology IV makes two fundamental points on this.

- A. One is about sin. Sin is unfaith and sins (plural) are symptoms of Sin (singular). There are no fences that can be constructed to prevent the “habitual and recurring” sin

of unfaith. "Progress" in coping with sin here is not "finally I've gotten so far," but adding one more day to a biography of dying and rising with Christ. If you want to quantify it, such "progress" goes something like this for a near-octogenarian: Today is the 28,981st day that this mortification/vivification happened to me. But there is no percentage progress or improvement that I can point to. To whittle down my sin of unfaith Christ alone must remain my mediator. Commandments, even God's commandments, don't do it, can't do it. Christ-trusters this side of the grave will never "progress" to the point of no longer needing to pray: "Lord, increase our faith."

B. So how do Augsburg's (Lutheran) Catholics pursue ethics? Apology IV puts it this way: "we commend good works in such a way as not to remove the free promise."

28. This notion just spelled out [in 27], this spoke, of "progress in the Christian life" is NOT "abhorrent to Lutherans." This one-day-at-a-time progression is solidly mitered into the doctrina-evangelii hub of the wheel. If ethical proposals for progress do not "articulate" this hub, there is only one alternative hub available. In that one the free promise gets lost. That's what's at stake in the homosexual turmoil among Christians today. Just to raise the conflict within the ELCA to focus on the promise would be "progress" indeed.

Maybe a Benne/Schultz disputation—Bob and Bob on doctrina evangelii— would do just that for the ELCA.

Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder

Werner Elert and Moral Decay in the ELCA!

Colleagues,

The last thing I could ever have expected—the one thing I could NEVER EVER have imagined—is that Werner Elert, a German theologian who died in 1954 and who never set foot in the USA, let alone taught anywhere in Lutheran schools here, could be exposed “in these last days” as a major source for the current moral decay of the ELCA. Can you name any other theologian who ever spoke so effectively—and allegedly so destructively—all the way across the Atlantic Ocean, from his grave in Bavaria, Germany, over half a century after he was interred there?

In America it can indeed happen and in the ELCA it IS happening. Who is claiming that? Several major-league theology profs at ELCA schools are now fingering Elert as villain for mentoring the ELCA to thumb its nose at God’s law.

I’m a Johnny-come-lately to all the kerfuffle. Several of you colleagues have recently drawn my attention to the brouhaha and alerted me to several documents now in the public domain. Two that I have read link ELCA’s disregard for genuine Christian ethics (=ethics true to the Bible, in their definition) to Elert’s influence, because he was “soft” on God’s law. The critics claim this even though the last thing Elert published before his death was a 595-page textbook on Lutheran Ethics with the first 200 pages labeled “Ethics according to God’s Law.”

One of these critiques can be found on Michael Root’s blog and the other in Robert Benne’s article in the current issue of the journal Lutheran Forum (Winter 2009).

For today's ThTh, let's look at the first of those two.

MICHAEL ROOT's opening paragraphs I reprint below. [For the extended conversation he has elicited GO to this address: <http://lutheranspersisting.wordpress.com/2010/01/27/the-problem-isnt-just-liberalism/>]

The Problem Isn't Just Liberalism

By Michael Root

A mistake being made by some opposed to recent developments in the ELCA, I think, is to blame everything simply on 'liberalism.' Omitted is a reflection on how modern developments within Lutheranism, even and especially among some counted as confessionalists, are a large part of the problem.

Take this quotation from Werner Elert I ran across today (The Structure of Lutheranism, p. 412 = p. 361 of Vol 1 in the German): "Christ's righteousness is my righteousness because the Word pertains to me. But it pertains to me only if this righteousness remains unentangled with my empirical existence. Faith, which hears this Word, has no other function than this hearing and exists only by hearing. If in spite of this it is my I that hears and believes, it can be only the 'pure' I, that is, the I cannot be further qualified in an empirico-psychological manner, therefore the transcendental I."

Once this move is made (and it is made in a similar manner by Gerhard Forde, without the Kantian trappings), the 'empirico-psychological' self, the self that actually lives in the world, is cut off from the self that truly lives in Christ. Ethics, especially as it relates to physical actions, then exists in a different dimension than faith. From here, it is downhill to where we are today in the ELCA. The church cannot be divided

over an ethical question. Granted, it may be a ways down this hill to get to where we are now and admirers of Elert (and Forde) may believe they have ways of stopping the slide down the hill, but this sheltering of the new self in Christ from life in the world (the 'gnostic' move in Forde that David Yeago has identified) is one element in the mix that has produced our present mess.

So far Root's text.

[ES comment. This book of Elert suffers throughout by very poor translation. Often it is clear that the translator did not understand what Elert was talking about.: Here's what Elert really says in his original German text:]

(The Structure of Lutheranism, p. 412. That is p. 361 of Vol. 1 in the German edition): Christ's righteousness is my righteousness because Christ's word (of forgiveness) is spoken to me. But it is true about me only if this ("alien") righteousness is not confused with the empirical righteousness I have produced for myself. Faith, which receives this word (of gifted "alien" righteousness), has no other function than to receive it. Faith exists only by receiving this gift. Nevertheless the "I" which receives and believes is still the "I," the human self, that I am. But it is not the self of my accumulated psychological-empirical biography. [For a "sinner-self" by definition does not, cannot, believe the Gospel.] Instead it is the "pure" new self, a self that transcends the sinner-self, which receives and believes the gifted righteousness."

[ES comment: Elert is reiterating St. Paul's discussion of his own "I" in Gal. 2:19f. Check it out. That's a key NT text for the reality of this "transcendent" self. This new "transcendent"

self is a “Christ-living-in-me” self. What that new self transcends is not daily life down here on the ground. Until the resurrection of the body (“soma” [=body] is also the Greek word for “self,” replicated even in English: some-body, any-body, no-body, every-body), new selves have only one place to exist, namely, in creation, in the nitty-gritty of daily life, at the same address where the old self lives. What the Christic-self transcends is the sinner-self. New Adam is qualitatively more, goes beyond—yes, transcends—Old Adam. When my self is “in Christ,” I am a new creation, the “old” Ed is trumped, aka transcended. But both selves live IN the the world, have the same street address. In my case Russell Blvd., St. Louis, Missouri.]

Elert’s German text continues: “I showed in the earlier section on ‘Luther’s view of Justification’ that for Luther the logical presupposition for speaking of this ‘transcendent self’ DOES NOT follow Kant’s formula (reduction to the categorical). Instead, for Luther the logical presupposition for speaking of a self that transcends the sinner-self is the judgment (the death-verdict) on that sinner-self [Selbstgericht], which when joined with faith, constitutes repentance.”

[N.B. Elert is not adopting Kant in place of Luther, but opting FOR Luther CONTRA Kant—as he does in all the books he ever wrote where Kant and Luther get into the text, I can only conclude that Root does not comprehend what Elert is talking about here. Which makes me wonder how he comprehends Luther—and possibly St. Paul too.]

Picking up again with the last line cited above, and continuing with Elert’s text (my translation):.

“. . . for Luther the logical presupposition for speaking of a self that transcends the sinner-self is the judgment (the death-

verdict) on that sinner-self [das Selbstgericht], which when joined with faith, constitutes repentance.

However, when faith in Christ's word brings forgiveness of sins, the deus absconditus in this same crucified Christ becomes deus revelatus. At that point Luther stands before "das Jenseits." [German has this pair of contrasts: 'Diesseits'—this side—and 'Jenseits'—the other side, the Eternal, the side of the Eternal One.] This 'Jenseits' is totally different from the world of agnostic determinism, which is the end of the line when one combines [Kant's] theoretical and practical reason. Faith perceives God's call, and that is the end of agnosticism. Faith receives God's forgiveness, and that is the end of determinism.

For determinism means that we will never be able to fulfill ethical demands and therefore also never be able to escape guilt. In the forgiveness of sins, the gift of alien righteousness, the ethical IS fulfilled and guilt IS overcome. Later on the Enlightenment viewed hearing God's word to be a corrective for errors in human knowledge. But Luther's concept of revelation is fundamentally different. Agnostic determinism for him is no error of judgment. Instead [for unredeemed humanity] it is the only possible and only correct way to interpret the world we live in along with its ethical demands. When one hears the Gospel, it does not abrogate this reality as though showing it to have been an erroneous view of the world. Instead the "Jenseits" [of God] reveals itself only there where this rational analysis of the world is carried through to this endpoint [punctum mathematicum] and has come to its final outcome in the knowledge of death.

In just this way the forgiveness of sins does not at all annul the validity of the ethical demand. If this demand had no validity, there would be no sin, and consequently no forgiveness either.

From this follow three consequences.

1. "Diesseits" and "Jenseits" are not related to each other as beginning and end of the same reality. The "Jenseits" of God rather shapes the "Diesseits" of our world-reality into a self-contained whole, i.e., it confirms not only the accuracy, but also the completeness of our knowledge of the world. By completeness we do not mean exhaustive knowledge of everything that may be known, but that the limits come into clear focus, the limits within which all knowledge of the world must be confined, regardless of whether or not we have already exhausted all that can be known about the world.[Then follows another page and a half of brilliant (and complex) German text, p.362-3—which I summarize as follows:]
2. The relationship between Diesseits and Jenseits is the relationship between the old and the new creations as spelled out in the scriptures.
3. Despite their totally different character and content, Diesseits & Jenseits have this common denominator: both of them are valid and operate effectively. But not deterministically. Yet it is only when one comes to faith in the Gospel that one comprehends that behind the validity of each stands the authority of God in his word/action of law and Gospel. It is such faith-in-the-Gospel that holds the two together. Conclusion: "This is the connection between justification and viewing the world (Weltanschauung). [The title for this Section 29 in Elert's Morphologie is "Rechtfertigung und Weltanschauung" (Justification and world view).] Lutheranism's Weltanschauung is incomprehensible apart from faith in God. But such faith does not call for any diminution of the great facts of the natural world and knowledge of its details. Faith receives this knowledge too in its totality

and affirms its validity. But it relativizes that world-knowledge at the same time by subsuming it into the majesty of God, where it is both affirmed and transcended.”

So far Elert’s text.

To identify this sort of Lutheran theology (Elert’s brand) with the “ELCA’s [alleged] downhill slide into Gnosticism” is impossible. Imagine what the ELCA would be if this brand of gold-medal Lutheran theology actually DID have influence on its slippery slopes. Also on slippery slopes of these Elert-critics. Some things would have to be different.

Next week, we intend to look at Benne’s article in the Lutheran Forum—where yours truly gets linked to Gerhard Forde as another subversive infecting the ELCA with what Benne calls “Elert’s gravely flawed construal of Luther and Lutheranism.” And what was Elert’s “gravely flawed construal”? “The essence of that construal was an almost monomaniacal focus on justification, to the exclusion of other crucial Christian doctrines.”

Gravely flawed. Monomaniacal. Those are hefty charges. But are they true?

For next week’s ThTh, more on Benne’s article, wherein I intend (in a sidebar) to identify the primal “villain” who brought Elert into 20th century American Lutheranism. Was not Forde, nor me, but ironically a bloke who once taught at Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary in Columbia, South Carolina, the very same ELCA seminary where two of the most vociferous Elert-critics are now tenured profs. Stay tuned.

Peace and Joy!

“Is Anybody Out There Listening?” Part Two

Colleagues,

A number of responses came in on last week's ThTh post. Here are four of them.

Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder

1. From Ron Neustadt, pastor, St. Mark Lutheran Church, Belleville, Illinois: Is anybody listening? Something that just occurred to me: the type of fishing that Peter, James, and John practiced did not involve bait, as far as I know. It was rather a matter of casting nets. Without lapsing too far into allegory, I wonder if that has implications for the fishing Jesus authorizes us to do, i.e. it's not a matter of finding the right kind of "bait" that will be attractive (and then spending a lot of time and energy on that bait – evangelism methods and programs), but a matter of enveloping people with the Promise, trusting that the Holy Spirit will draw them in by means of that net, as Jesus promised.

I don't have much more to add, except the observation that people, like fish, are not stupid. They know when you're trying to "hook 'em," and they swim the other way. No

wonder. I would, too. But “hooking them” is not our job. Loving them is. And how can we love them if we keep the Promise (that they are dear to God for Jesus’ sake) to ourselves?

Thinking that it is up to us to “hook ‘em” doesn’t seem to me to put much confidence in the power of the Good News. (“For I am not ashamed of the Gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who trusts it ...”) Besides that, it is the Holy Spirit who generates that trust, not we.

Peace and Joy,
Ron

2. From Jerry Burce, pastor, Messiah Lutheran Church, Fairview Heights, OhioEd, at the end of last week’s ThTh you tell us:

“Richard Koenig of Cromwell, Connecticut, tells me of ‘an event I hope we will be able to pull off up here, a one day event of reflection on The Future of Justification.’

And then he asks: Got any thoughts? I did. Like this . . . Richard, I suggest you ring the changes on a theme something like this: The contrast between folks in a culture that is ho-hum about the Christian Gospel of justification before God and the 24/7 drive of each of us to ‘be right.’ Justification—proving that I’m right, that I’m OK — is THE AGENDA of everyone’s life.”

A thought from this end—

If Dick or anybody is looking for secular evidence of the assertion above, have them check out a 10-yr. old Robin Williams movie called “Final Cut.” It’s all about justification — a futuristic fantasy about how folks might

try to wind up with the big "OK" stamp on their lives. (Come to think of it: Dick's conference title perfectly describes the flick – The Future of Justification (Secular-style. An Approach).

Also: just noticed that FX, the cable channel, is launching a new TV in mid-March. Title: "Justified." I'll be making a point of checking out an episode or two.

Jerry

3. From Brian Days, ELCA Synodically Authorized Minister, Beardstown, Illinois I liked what you had to say there in TT609. Do they even want to hear it? I watch the kids' lives fill up with sports, school and social calendars full of have-to-do's and can't-miss events. Parents and other adults are kept quite busy with their own things and are far too happy to show up on Sunday for an hour and call it good. And those are the ones that will say they are involved in their church. The others are the Christmas and Easter guests that are on the books but can't find the church the other 363 days of the year.

I count myself as blessed that my eyes were opened. I don't HAVE TO serve our Lord with every day I have, I GET TO! So I will run the race until I'm called home. Scattering seeds wherever I go, on whatever soil I may be standing on.

In Christ,
Brian Days

4. And then from the other side of the planet, Australia, these words from Neal Nuske, veteran teacher at St. Peters College in Brisbane, Queensland. [In Aussie parlance "college" is what you do before you do "university."] RE: Does anyone out there want to hear our Good News?

Answer: Yes.

Why?

Crossings as Cognitive Re-configuring

Greetings from one appreciative Aussie 'down under.'

Each Friday I turn on my Staff Room computer and go immediately to Thursday Theology!

Such is life 'down under!' It has been a valuable and refreshing experience for me to regularly re-configure the coordinates of Reformation Lutheran Theology in light of mutations and variations that can at times obscure the central focus of Luther's key insights.

I have been reading Crossings-Thursday Theology for over a decade. It is great 'to be brought up to speed' about issues related to clarifying the meaning of the words 'Law' and 'Gospel'.

The clear distinctions between these two critical theological concepts can dissolve easily, then result in a mutation, a new form of theology and praxis.

Geographical isolationism can produce such mutations, as can working in the context of a religious based, Secondary School educational institution.

It is in this context that the 'Two-Kingdoms' insight of Luther is in need of regular revisiting and reviewing because students can easily –but mistakenly– equate the organised life of their school experience as 'the gospel.'

Or, they can be led to believe that the values which guide an institution are Christian values, ergo 'gospel.' This

happens because schools may promote themselves as Christian schools.

Consequently, students equate their experience inside such institutions as an example of Christian life.

Unfortunately then the freedom of the gospel, a theological concept so filled with liberation and joy, can be destroyed.

My theory is that institutions who have their *raison d'être* and existence for the sake of God's work in the world (*creatio continua*) in the 'Kingdom of the Left,' schools etc., cannot be governed by the gospel.

Whenever that is attempted, then the Gospel will become a new Law.

In other words the Law destroys the message of the Gospel in that particular community.

For this reason 'gospel' is not 'religion' nor can it be institutionalized or claimed to be a guiding organisational administrative principle governing the life of an institution. If so, then Gospel disappears beneath the Law.

Calvin attempted to make the gospel a guiding organisational principle, or a fundamental Christian value which he believed could socialize the citizens of Geneva into the Christian lifestyle. As a result, the Gospel became Law.

So the constant underlying question that governs the way I read Crossings is the simple yet profound question:

What are we talking about when we use the word 'gospel'?

Fortunately Crossings has, as its focus, that concern.

While I am no longer in the ordained ministry nevertheless I still read and reflect upon theology.

Many thanks from one currently living in a country experiencing fires, floods and droughts -but no blizzards!

P.S. When I subsequently asked Neal about his daily work at St. Peters, I got this:

I am teaching Senior Classes fulltime in the area of Study of Religion, and Theory of Knowledge for the IB [International Baccalaureate] Diploma Program. In both areas there is ample scope to continue theological reflections.

For example, I have written Units on Sacred Texts and Hermeneutics, Religious Fundamentalisms, Science and Religion, Intelligent Design or Un-intelligent Design, Religion and Anti-Semitism, Indigenous Spirituality etc. These Units are for the Senior Classes and are part of the State-based School Curriculum (The Queensland Studies Authority).

I also teach History, mainly Australia's Involvement in the Pacific War.- – – Currently I am reading works on the response of the churches to Fascism during WW2 and plan to further develop a Unit on Bonhoeffer for the graduating class, namely Year 12 Study of Religion.

Keep well. Regards from a very humid Brisbane.

Neal Nuske,
St Peters Lutheran College

Is Anybody Out There Listening? Or Even Interested Enough to Want to Listen?

Colleagues,

At the Crossings conference a fortnight ago, the final session was small groups doing roundtable talk at lunch. We were to address the question, "Does anybody, much less everybody, out there really need to hear our good news?"

Timothy Hoyer, pastor at Gloria Dei Lutheran Church, Lakewood, New York, a conference participant, sent me his further reflection on that question. At the end of his prose, you'll find a postscript from me. Let the conversation continue.

Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder

Ed,

We did not do a good job answering that question at our table. It is a question that I try to figure out every Sunday. So, here are my thoughts about that question.

DOES ANYBODY OUT THERE REALLY NEED TO HEAR JESUS' GOOD NEWS?

Jesus' death for us is why there is a need for everybody to hear Jesus' promise. For those who trust Jesus to forgive them, give them love and life, that promise is the power of salvation. For

those who do not trust Jesus, his promise, which is based on his crucifixion, is a scandal or foolishness and so is not needed. Christians base the hope and meaning and value of their lives on Jesus.

For people who do not trust Jesus, they also have hope and meaning and put value on their lives. Their life is not randomness. No one does things for no reason (randomness). People always have a reason for what they do, such as: I like it; it's fun; it was the right thing to do; it's healthy; I need the money; I had nothing better to do; it's good for the environment. The reason is always based on some system of value. That system of value gives meaning to what people do. People do things they value and are connected to what they do by the fact they do them. Therefore, people feel they have value and meaning through what they do.

Without that value and meaning in what people do, people themselves would have no value and no meaning (randomness). People label acts as good or bad, right or wrong, according to whether or not the act agrees with their system of value or meaning. The systems of value nourish life or make life feel good, usually in regard to oneself, but also for others. People often take their system of value and meaning for granted, though some do consciously choose their system.

People who are not Christian will say they do not need "religion" or they do not need Jesus. But they never say they do not need their own religion-their own system of value and meaning. Actually, they are quite loyal to their system of value and meaning. That loyalty to one's system of value and meaning keeps people from being loyal to God the Father of Jesus. As long as a person's system of value and meaning works for them, they are satisfied, even unto death. As they near death they will give a value or meaning to their death and say, "I have

lived a good, long life." Then death is a seal of approval on the goodness of their life.

To tell people that death is God's judgment against them as a way to make them feel a need for Christ Jesus does not work because people will respond from their own system and say that God's judgment does not exist for them. God's judgment and Jesus as mediator are not part of their system. They don't need Jesus. So a different approach is needed to offer the good news of Jesus to anyone and everyone. Christian preachers need to understand the systems of value and meaning that people use so they can show people how those systems of value and meaning are not as beneficial as Jesus is.

In Crossings heritage, we have two examples of getting people to see that their system does not work. In THE PROMISING TRADITION, a reader in systematic theology going back to Seminex days, there is Walter Bouman's dialogue, "Yes and No in a Taxi Cab," a story of a rider talking to the taxi driver. The rider shows the driver that the driver's loyalty to his children is his system of value and meaning, but that system will fail the driver because the kids will grow up and leave. If an accident were to kill the driver's children, then the driver would be left with no system. The other example is Ed Schroeder's steps on how to talk to an atheist, "The God Question." [<https://crossings.org/thursday/2003/thur102303.shtml>]. Those steps are the same as the rider's talking to the taxi driver. Those steps show the atheist that the atheist does trust in something. But how is that something doing, especially in those events of sickness, tragedy, and when "stuff" happens? When the taxi driver and the atheist realize that their system does not help them in bad times, then they are offered the promise of Jesus that can and does help in bad times.

C.F.W. Walther in his book on The Distinction Between Law and

Gospel writes that the law is spoken to people who are confident that they are doing well in their system, and the Gospel is addressed to those who have lost confidence in their system or themselves, that is, they are unsure or troubled. But must Christians wait until there are bad times or they can point out the possibility of bad times to convince people that they really need Jesus' good news?

In Acts, Paul's sermon in Athens presents the Athenians the God they did not know, the God who is to be honored and worshipped because this God raised Jesus from the dead. The resurrection of Jesus vindicates him and opens the door to his Father as the God who resurrects the dead to everlasting life. Jesus says that he has not come to call the righteous, those who are doing well in their system of value and meaning, a system that was even God-given. Jesus said he came to call the unrighteous-those who knew that they failed the God-given system.

So maybe Christians need to understand well the systems people use and the systems society uses, so that they can recognize when people feel they fail society's systems and empathize when people's own systems are not working. When Christians are well acquainted with others so that the Christians learn their friend's system, then Christians can point out the not so good parts of that system, and they can also point out how the person cheats to deal with the not so good parts of their system.

The not so good parts of all systems that give people meaning and value are: they are conditional; they are retributive; they are demanding; the systems are always full of threats; the system will demand action but not enable you to do what is demanded; the system offers no help to correct the errors people make when they fail to do what their system demands; and the demands of each person's system always point out when the person fails to fulfill those demands.

An easy example is having a job. People often base their identity on their work and base the goodness of the day on how the work day went. The system of having a job is conditional. You get to work on the condition you do your work and keep doing your work well. The system is retributive in that a worker is docked for being late, or given a bonus for working extra hard. A worker is promoted only if the worker does something to earn the promotion. The system of a worker demands that you get to work on time, that you work diligently, that your work meets quality standards, that you don't come to work drunk, that you don't take extra sick days, that you treat other workers with respect, that you do what your manager tells you, and that you do an honest day's work for an honest day's pay. All those demands are made of the worker but the employer does nothing to help the worker meet those demands. The employer does not make sure the worker gets to work on time. The worker is responsible to meet those demands or the worker gets fired. And every demand points out how you are doing meeting those demands or not meeting them. The system always judges you.

Those demands of the system are not always met. People call in sick when they are not sick, or they take extra-long breaks, or they hang wallpaper not quite perfectly but it's good enough. When people are honest about not always meeting the demands of what a worker is supposed to do, they make excuses. That is, they cheat. The cheating is done in two ways. One is to be confident in one's system by ignoring where one has not followed one's own system. The second is to lower the system's values or expectations, or to say doing some of the expectations is enough, or to say trying is enough. "I'm only human." "Rules are meant to be broken." "Do it, no one is watching." "No one is perfect."

People don't say that having a job is their religion. But it is what they use to make themselves good, and the job can make the

day good or bad. When asked how their day was, people will answer that they were busy, or that they got a lot of things done so it was a good day, or they feel good because they got all the orders filled correctly. People will say they want their kids to choose their religion when they grow up so they don't send them to any church. But those same people will tell their kids to grow up and get a job, to work hard, make something of themselves, be honest, do what is right. In that way they are giving their kids their religion, and not letting them make a choice about it. They don't realize that their system that gives them value and meaning is a religion, is something on which they depend. For them, that is just how life works, as if there is no choice. If there is any choice, it is choosing an additional system, such as being a sports fan, or taking pride in one's family, or becoming an expert in a hobby, or being a volunteer firefighter, or being very involved in one's church.

So Christian preachers can point out a characteristic of a system to the hearers and make them aware of how that characteristic works in their lives and how it makes them feel—whether it burdens them or benefits them. Then Christian preachers can point out the characteristic of Jesus' realm (system) that is good and new.

For example, as the worker's system is retributive, Jesus' system is mercy or forgiveness, and life suddenly is not just there but becomes a gift. Or, as the worker's system is full of demands, Jesus' realm is free of demands, only his offers to love and to forgive. For every characteristic of a person's system of value and meaning, Jesus' realm has a characteristic that is new and good. As already said, for retribution Jesus has mercy; for demands, Jesus has offers. For conditional, Jesus has no conditions, he just gives. For threats, Jesus only invites. For demands that point out how you do good or bad, Jesus has only his promise that in him you are always good. For the times

you do wrong, systems offer no solution, but Jesus offers his death and resurrection, which is his way of forgiveness.

This diagnosing of the systems of value and meaning can be done with Crossings' Diagnosis/Prognosis paradigm. Step 3, the Eternal Problem, the level that gets us to needing Jesus' death and rising, needs to be described differently than "we have a problem with God," as was done in the Taxi Cab story. As said earlier, people don't have God in their system and so God is not a problem for them. But their problem is that they have their systems of value and meaning which bring with them not-so-good characteristics and they can't get out of it. There is no system in the old creation without those characteristics. And there is always a system.

People need an end to that way and the creation of a new way, which is and has been done by Jesus dying and rising to create a new way of life for us. People can still and will still have their work, their sports, families, and hobbies, but they don't depend on them for value and meaning. Jesus is their value and meaning. Sports and work and family and hobbies are now gifts to use, to enjoy, but not to depend on. Anyone and everyone needs the good news of Jesus because he died and rose for all to have life in him.

Timothy Hoyer

9 Feb 2010

P.S. from EHS

In a message dated 2/2/10 Richard Koenig of Cromwell, Connecticut, tells me of "an event I hope we will be able to pull off up here, a one day event of reflection on The Future of Justification."

And then he asks: Got any thoughts? I did. Like this

Richard, I suggest you ring the changes on a theme something like this: The contrast between folks in a culture that is ho-hum about the Christian Gospel of justification before God and the 24/7 drive of each of us to “be right.”

If you’ve got money, get Fred Niedner (Valparaiso University) to come out and give his stump speech on this topic which starts out: “Some folks say that sex is the most powerful human drive. Not so. It’s the drive to ‘be right.’ If you don’t believe that, just get married.” Justification—proving that I’m right, that I’m OK — is THE AGENDA of everyone’s life. And it never ends. Tomorrow you’ve got to get up and do it again. One way to stop the rat race is the justification Jesus offers. First benefit is very practical: full-stop on the drive to self-justify. That’s real relief. Aka Freedom.

Or this from the Elert seminar we just had at the Crossings conference: Elert starts his theology with this axiom. “The Ur-mythos in Gen. 3 is the trademark of human existence, human history, ever since. We are called to justify our lives before God. And we never can. Even if folks don’t acknowledge the voice as God’s voice, the voice itself, calling us to justify ourselves, never goes away. The pressure never ends—unless, until, there comes the Christ-encounter.”

Or Arthur Miller’s less-famous play AFTER THE FALL where all the characters—none of them “religious”—are working hard to justify themselves. Everyone. From protagonist Quentin, a lawyer, we hear words that (as I remember) go something like this: “I’ve spent my entire life arguing my own case before some mysterious bench. And then one day I looked up and there was no one sitting

on that bench.” So even for atheists (nobody on the bench), “justify thyself” (Adam, where are you? Quentin, where you?) is the maddening mantra that won’t go away. Marvelous Biblical theology from Miller: After the Fall everyone is working hard on self-justification. It’s a “you gotta.” Where does that pressure come from?

Here’s a parallel from the Crossings shindig a few days ago.

In a small group session I heard Lori Cornell (Seattle, Washington) give her show-and-tell on the non-religion professed by vast numbers in the US Northwest. “They’re not interested in the Christian Gospel,” we learned, “because if you’re healthy and have money [that’s an important qualifier], the alternate gospels of Mt. Rainier, the ocean, the Cascades, the adventure of the next exhilarating experience, the..., the... the... fill all alleged religious needs.”

Then someone offered this: Before Christians seek to show such folks how winsome the Gospel is – also for these dear worldlings–the full reality of life without the Gospel, “deeper and final diagnosis” in Crossings lingo, is what we should be about. Reminds me of a story about a homiletics professor at Union Theological Seminary in NYC, who kept teasing his students about the dull titles on the sermons they handed in. “If I were riding the bus up Broadway and came past your church and saw the sermon title on the sign out in front, would it prompt me to get off the bus.” One student finally came up with a winner– “There’s a Bomb on Your Bus!”

Whether or not you hear the voice as God’s voice calling you to justify yourself, or just the voice of one of his creaturely masks doing it for him, “justify yourself” is the bomb on

everyone's bus since Eden. 2010 is but one more year in this human history after the fall. Relief from THAT voice would be relief indeed. Thank you, Jesus.

A Report on Crossings International Conference III, January 25-27, 2010

Colleagues,

For this week's ThTh post Crossings President Steven Kuhl reports on last week's get-together here in St. Louis.

Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder

God's Promise, Our Mission: A Post-Conference Review

Last week 101 members of the Crossings Community gathered for the Third International Crossings Conference at Our Lady of the Snows Conference Center and Shrine in Belleville, Illinois, just a few miles east across the Mississippi River from St. Louis. If you were there you know both how full and how rewarding it was. If you weren't there, you can still reap some of the fruit, since soon we will have many of the major presentations and homilies posted on the Crossings website. Even so, there was no substitute for the face-to-face exchanges and the mutual

conversations and consolation of Christian siblings that filled the three-day event.

The first thing to note is how international and diverse the Crossings Community is. We know from our website "hit" statistics that we have Crossings Partners in 120 countries, most of them unknown by name and face, yet united in Word, faith and Spirit. These brothers and sisters participate in the Crossings Community and benefit from the Crossings Mission through some 47,000 distinct computers. From that "hit" parade representatives came from six different countries, including, Germany, India, Singapore, South Korea, Liberia, and Nigeria. Stateside participants hailed from Alaska to Florida and from California to New York. Half of the attendees were long time Crossings members and half were relatively new to Crossings, being introduced to Crossings through web-surfing or word-of-mouth invitation. While the majority of those in attendance were clergy and graying, nevertheless nearly a quarter were laity, and we were overjoyed to have 10 seminarians and a generous sprinkling of younger lay participants.

The theme was at once perennial and timely: GOD'S PROMISE, OUR MISSION: MAKING THE CRUCIAL LINK. Three keynote speakers unfolded the theme, each complementing and building on the previous speaker. Jukka Kaariainen (former missionary kid, doctoral student at Fordham University, pastor and campus minister at the Lutheran Church of the Messiah in Princeton, NJ) set the stage for the whole conference by giving us a systematic account of a Lutheran Theology of Missions. Drawing on the work of Robert Bertram (that "PROMISSIO is the secret to MISSIO") and Ed Schroeder's recent work on a Lutheran theology of mission, he pulled together into one place a comprehensive vision of a "duplex" theology of mission that is soundly seated on the three-legged stool of (leg-one) "the law-promise" (duplex) hermeneutic, (leg-two) the theology of the cross, and (leg-

three) the hiddenness of God. This paper is a summary of the thought he is pouring into his nearly finished dissertation which goes by the title of "MISSIO Shaped by PROMISSIO: Lutheran Missiology Confronts the Challenge of Religious Pluralism." It is a must read.

The second keynote was presented by Jerry Burce, formerly a missionary kid and later missionary in Papua New Guinea and presently a pastor of Messiah Lutheran Church in Fairview Park, Ohio. Jerry sang the kind of theology that was presented by Jukka, but "changed the key," so to speak, by putting it into language that might better resonate with contemporary ears. Jerry said we use too many "walnut words," words that are too hard for people to crack and too difficult for people to dig out the meat of the gospel.

He began with Luther's distinction between "God's alien work" (*opus alienum dei*) and "God's proper work" (*opus proprium dei*) and designated them God's two (distinct and different) "missions" in the world. One is God's "alien" mission (alien = not God's preferred option) and the other God's "proper" mission (God's preferred mission). Turning these two terms back into Latin, Jerry offered us "missio aliena dei" [MAD] and "missio propria dei" [MPD, with vowels added to make it pronounceable becomes MyPaD]. MAD is that work of God's law that ultimately drives us to madness. MyPaD is that work whereby Christ prepares a place ("a pad") for us to dwell in God. Jerry gave an example of how congregations might find language from their contemporary world that can be used to express the promise of God (MyPaD) in a fresh way in our MAD world. I cannot begin to do justice to the imaginative word-smithing Jerry does. Read it for yourself.

Third keynote presentation was given by Bill Burrows. Bill has quite a resume. He is a former Roman Catholic priest who is now married and who has been a missionary, the managing editor of

Orbis Books, and president of the American Society of Missiology. His commitment to the idea of the “gospel as the promise of the forgiveness of sins” is both deep and wide, and he credits Ed Schroeder (and the friendship they established through the ASM) as nurturing that insight. Bill’s presentation came to us over internet connection because weather prevented him from being with us in person. What was impressive was how well Bill used that medium to both present his paper and answer questions in the Q&A. Indeed, this last minute “fix” (thanks to Nathan Schroeder, one of Crossings’ technical geniuses) to what we thought was a condition that would derail the whole conference, actually inspired our participants from Singapore to ask this question: Might we not broadcast elements of future conferences to those gathered in churches in Singapore or other places around the globe? Amazing how the Spirit might use adversity to seed new mission opportunities. Bill’s fundamental contribution to our discussion was to remember that the promise is a LIVING WORD and that participation in it is fundamentally rooted in Word and Sacrament. Too often the modern missionary focus is on “social transformation” AT THE EXPENSE OF its proper focus as the “promise of the forgiveness of sins” extended concretely and unambiguously in liturgical gathering. Bill’s paper, too, is a must read.

As if that weren’t enough, the conference attendees also feasted on a wide range of topical discussions offered through 12 breakout sessions, a panel discussion with the keynote presenters, and three round table discussions, all aimed at helping us “make the crucial link” between God’s promise and our own unique mission placement. Such notables as Robert Kolb (Professor at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis and co-translator of the Book of Concord), Fred Niedner (Professor at Valparaiso University, author and master teacher), and Art Simon (founder of Bread for the World) filled out those sessions along with

other talented theological members of the Crossings Community. A special interview with New Testament scholar Frederick Danker on “Not Missing the Mission in Luke” and three Monday pre-conference seminars (one on exploring the Crossings method in text study with Steve Albertin and Marcus Felde, one on “Dusting off Elert,” featuring Matt Becker, Ed Schroeder and Bob Schultz, and one on Art Simon’s journey with Bread for the World, all generated great discussion and sparked new enthusiasm for keeping mission and promise properly linked.

Finally, in fulfillment of the call Bill Burrows issued in his presentation, the conference was punctuated with liturgical opportunities for prayer, preaching and praise. Indeed, so edifying was the preaching in those liturgical gatherings (done by Steve Albertin, Marcus Felde, David Schreiber, and Mike Hoy) that the conference participants urged us to also place them on the website along with the conference papers. So, by popular request, you will find them too on our website. Of course, the pinnacle of our liturgical celebration was the Eucharist on Tuesday evening organized and presided over by Ron Neustadt. There Marcus Lohrmann (bishop of Northwestern Ohio Synod, ELCA) treated us to a model sermon that weaved the promise of God into the fabric of our lives equipping us to go out and enfold God’s dear worldlings with that very same promise.

In closing, I want to thank all who attended the conference and all who support Crossings’ “duplex” mission of helping Christians make the crucial link between God’s Promise and our mission. Special thanks go to the Crossings Board of Directors, whom I introduced at the conference and who give generously of themselves to the Crossings Community. On the Conference Planning Committee were Steve Albertin, Marcus Felde, Cathy Lessmann, Jerry Burce, and Don Tanner. Lori Cornell edits the Sabbath Theology text studies, Mike Hoy edits the Crossings Newsletter, Carol Braun is working with Bob Schultz on a fresh

translation of Elert's "The Christian Faith," and Ed Schroeder advises and edits Thursday Theology. One more behind-the-scenes person is Tom Law. He posts everything on the web. Because of him, the "must-read" materials from the conference become "get-to-read" materials for everyone.

Steven Kuhl, President
The Crossings Community, Inc.

Werner Elert's Law/Gospel Textbook on Christian Ethics (Part II–Conclusion)

Colleagues,

Here's the second half of my offering at the Crossings International conference earlier this week. And "international" it was indeed with participants from Korea, Nigeria, Liberia, India, Singapore and Germany. The gathering was mountaintop stuff. More next Thursday.

A bunch of us spent most of one day looking at the theology of Werner Elert (1885-1954). Bob Schultz, who did his doctorate under Elert, and Matt Becker, a youngster alongside octogenarians Schultz and EHS and today's Elert insider, rounded out the troika. Bob and I knew Elert "live." We were his students in the early 1950s. Matt's expertise has come from "just" reading Elert's half dozen "big" books and manifold essays. It was a three-session seminar. Matt took us through Elert's life and work, deftly weaving his theological biography

through the Sturm und Drang of the first half of 20th century Germany; Bob took us through Elert's dogmatics [The Christian Faith], which Bob is translating for English language publication, and I did a show-and-tell on Elert's ethics [The Christian Ethos]. Last week's ThTh 606 and this week's post, when pasted together, were my handout at the seminar.

Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder

Werner Elert: THE CHRISTIAN ETHOS

Chapter 6. THE NEW CREATURE

32. The New Creation

- New creation is "brand new" – "creatio ex nihilo" – a creation from no pre-existent material.
- The "ex nihilo" character of the new creation means that it is done exclusively by God independent of all human prior prerequisites. This is the meaning of "sola gratia."
- In Roman Catholic theology grace is so understood that the new ethos is not a new creation, but a renovation of the old, repairing the defect, restoring it into the original product it once was. Not so God's new creation in the NT.
- God's word of pardon actually creates a new ethos, a new person—does not build upon some prior "good" still present in sinners—and this word in and of itself possesses such creative power.

33. The Power of the Holy Spirit

- The creative work of the Holy Spirit in Christians is tangible but some of it is manifest only to the eye of faith.

- When the apostles speak of the Holy Spirit, they do not refer to psychological processes at all.
- The power of the Spirit is “axiological reality” [=value-bestowing, value-changing power] from outside myself. Because it is God’s power, it does make things happen, some of which all can see. The full picture of what all is going on—the Spirit’s generating a whole new existence for former sinners—is perceptible only to the “pneumatic” person, the one animated by this Holy Spirit coming from Christ.

34. Repentance and Rebirth

- Not WHEN but WHAT is the key question about the new life. Just what is it? The new ethos concretely operating in the life of Christ-trusters
- We cannot draw from the NT an outline of a normative “standard” process, a step-by-step sequence, for the beginning of the new life. Repentance, conversion, rebirth are different NT terms for the same basic thing: God’s grace-verdict becoming concrete in us.
- “Grace-imperatives” of the NT have humans as acting subjects AND God as author at the same time. Not to be confused with “law-imperatives.” The two kinds of imperatives differ in the same way as law and Gospel differ in indicative mood sentences. One is a requirement, the other an offer. [Bertram: one is “you’ve got to,” the other “you get to.”]
- The NT recognizes no state of perfection in the life of a Christian. It recognizes only a state of growth.

35. Re-integration (restoring the “status integritatis.” restoring the image or God, replacing the shattered mirror)

- God himself rehabilitates world history, giving

sinners the status of being “re-integrated” back to God..

- Jesus Christ is the reintegrated “imago dei” present in history, who by that very fact already transcends “standard” human history, the continuing story of fractured images of God. With God’s image restored Christians also transcend history in the same way.
- The daily life of re-integration is not “imitating Christ,” but “hidden” servanthood to this master.

36. Freedom

- The new person is not free FOR the law, as Kant insists, but FROM the law, as Paul teaches.
- Freedom is found first of all in our relation to God, wherein we are free from law and live a life without law, but not a lawless life.
- The concept “already, not yet” applies to freedom which is on the increase in the world actively at work secretly razing nomological reality. [The full text (in English) of Elert’s #36 Freedom exists on the Crossings website. Here’s where to find it: <https://crossings.org/thursday/1998/thur1217.shtml>”]

Chapter 7. THE NEW OBEDIENCE

37. Faith

- Faith is the “human side” of the new ethos of the new person. The “God-side” of it is grace.
- Despite differences of expression, the NT usage of the word faith has this in common in all instances: person-to-person trust in Christ.
- Faith in the gospel is not another way of obedience, for, strictly speaking, one cannot “obey” the gospel; either you trust it or you distrust it. The “obedience of faith” mentioned in the NT is

precisely this, trusting the gospel.

38. Obedience and Faith

- The motivation for Christian obedience to the Lord Christ is faith. Trusting Christ, we do what he calls us to do.
- Obedience under the authority of Christ is first and foremost suffering obedience.
- Good works are necessary, but they do not “have to” be done to make faith happen. They are faith’s fruit.

39. The Venture of Works (“Wagnis der Werke” in German, the “risk,” the “daring aspect” of works)

- Luther and Kierkegaard differ on interpreting the temptation of Abraham. It is not Abraham’s ethics that are challenged: to kill or not to kill (Kierkegaard,) but his faith: to trust God’s promise or not to trust it when God himself seems to be destroying that promise (Luther).
- Every human act is an adventure (a Wagnis, a risk) which the Christian dares to undertake because of his faith in the promise.
- Common works done “naturally” within the orders are just as much a “Wagnis” as works which are extra-ORDER-nary (outside the order, even breaking the order, the “Gefüge” where God has placed us). Both are good works when they are done trusting Christ’s promise.

40. Renunciation

- Christ himself confronts us with the call for the “infinite resignation.” To give up everything and follow him.
- Traditional Roman Catholic theology leaves the issue of renunciation up to the individual, but Christ does not.
- The infinite resignation which Christ calls for is

not a renunciation of, a flight away from, the material finite world. Rather it is the application of faith to the total and specific content of our own particular life. To hold things dear, but not to cling to them for dear life.

41. Sanctification

- Sanctification and renovation raise the agenda: How can donated life also become an active life (i.e., my human acts have me as the subject yet they are originated by God)?
- Sanctification belongs to the “cultic sphere.” 1.) It literally means drawing close to God; 2) It is redemption from guilt so that a saint (but only a saint) can sanctify himself; and 3) It makes humans capable of becoming living “spiritual sacrifices.”

42. Love of the Neighbor, Love of Enemy, Brotherly Love

- If a “religion of love” is what the NT proclaims, then there is nothing new in the NT. The “law of love” is still law, nomological existence.
- The NT itself has set a threefold defense against the “religion of love” orientation. Its portrayal of neighbor-love, brother-love and love-of-enemies (3 different categories) do not match the particulars of a generic religion of love. Christ is a necessary player in this NT trio. He is unnecessary in a religion of love, other than as a teacher, but someone else could just as well be that teacher.
- Since Christ always stands between God and the loving Christian and the receiver of the Christian’s love, “agape” is different from “eros” and different from humanitarianism.

43. Love of God and the First Commandment

- Contrary to Augustine, “love of self” cannot be the motive for loving the brother, nor for loving God.

- The Christian's "agape" for God is identical with "faith" in the Pauline-Luther tradition.
- Love fulfills the law and at the same time annuls it and sets up a replacement order to the law's order, an "order of love and forgiveness " This new order of love and forgiveness unfolds in mutual interaction (ping-pong "agape"!) between God, Christ, the Christian, the fellow Christian.

Chapter 8. THE INVISIBLE STRUGGLE

44. Two Ways and Two Eras

- The struggle in the Christian's life runs right through the middle of his entire existence as a constant call for faith. The NT has several sets of terms for the invisible struggle—two ways (broad and narrow), two eons (old and new) two kinds of time (chronological and eschatological, the latter being "kairos" time).
- The difference between chronos time and kairos time is the difference between time "managed" by law, and time managed by the promise.
- The "Kairos" of Christ's promise makes chronological time in all its parts a gift of God.

45. Two Kingdoms

- Another pair of NT terms for the invisible struggle is the two "basileia," the two regimes that Christians live under, both created by the Word of God.
- The present age, although Satan's domain, is also God's realm
- Living in the two realms entails the problem of relating and distinguishing the two kingdoms. Fundamental here too is that one is God's regime of law, the other God's regime of promise.

46. The Third Use of the Law

- The place of the law in the life of the regenerate has been a point of conflict throughout Christian history.
- In Reformation Lutheranism it became the debate about the twofold or threefold use of God's law . Luther: only two. Melanchthon: three. Formula of Concord: only two.
- The third use of the law "recapitulates once more the fundamental problem of Christian ethics." It seeks to bridge the opposition between God's two verdicts of law and Gospel. Law has the last word. The Gospel is there only to assist in getting people to do the right thing. But in reality, the Gospel's goal is faith, getting people to trust God's promise.
- Calvin's notion of the "third use" as the law's "primary use" reveals his conflict with Luther on both law and gospel.

47. Prayer

- Prayer is the cry of need, weakness and despair, prime evidence of the invisible struggle. A cry for help both for one's self (supplication) or for another (intercession).
- Christian prayer is grounded in faith in God's promise, not faith on God's providence.
- Distinctively Christian prayer is prayer as a plea for grace: Prayer "in Jesus' name" is not invoking a magic formula, but expressing the faith that Christ is our connection with God as Father. Thus the petition for the gift of the Spirit (who keeps our Christ-connection alive) is the most urgent of all.

48. The Beauty of the World[Probably no other book on Christian ethics has a chapter on the beauty of the

world.]

- There is a “worldly” way and a “faith” way to enjoy the beauty of the world. Faith see Christ as reconciliation for the whole cosmos. That is the world God “so loved.” So does the Christian.
- As long as sinners live under the wrath of God, every creature frightens them for it preached their own mortality to them. Faith knows this too, but dares against them to believe in God’s promise for this cosmos and God’s presence in that world.
- Thus creation is illuminated by the glory of God. Christian hope for surviving death also applies to the creation.
- Hope has disappeared from today’s scientific analysis of the cosmos. Yet Christians can rejoice in this cosmos because of their future grounded in Christ’s promise. They hear and see vicariously for the whole cosmos and articulate God’s promise for it too..

49. The Total Personality

- The invisible struggle as a split within the human person has been addressed since time immemorial. Though that line of struggle fluctuates, it always goes straight through us.
- Plato’s solution was to see it as a body-spirit split was “spiritualization,” the non-material self (soul) survives. It is immortal, the bodily passed away. Plato’s immortality of the soul is not grounded in law/promise theology.
- The “harmonization” of the conflicting parts proposed by idealism is not grounded in law/promise either.
- Nor is the “despiritualization”—the biological is supreme—proposed by Nietzsche, by the Nazis.

- The dualism of body/spirit is an unfortunate heritage which Christianity received from Greece. The Christian notion of reintegration is rooted in a very different notion of the conflict. It is the conflict between two “whole” persons within our one self. “Old Adam” and “new human.” This old and new are NOT body and spirit.
- Two God-relationships are in conflict. This conflict is our dilemma. When the image of God is restored, wholeness is restored. “As if” existence ceases. In forgiveness the new human acknowledges the sin of the old one. He knows his identity with that old one, for he knows that, though once condemned to eternal extinction, the miracle of mercy has granted him a new life.

Part III

OBJECTIVE ETHOS

Chapter 9. THE CHRISTIAN TOTALITY

50. Localization (German: Ortsbestimmung: “Just what are we talking about”)

- The first 8 chapters have examined the theological ethos of individual subjects, thus “subjective” ethos. But there is more data of Christian ethos, namely, the ethos of the new human community, the church, created by Christ’s word of forgiveness. The body of Christ—Christ the head and we the member—is more than the sum of the parts. That body has a “corporate” ethos of God’s approval—worth, value, quality—of its own. It is “objectively” there even when individual members of the body have personally, “subjectively,” deserted Christ’s promise. E.g., The sacrament of baptism is valid even if the one

baptizing the candidate is an unbeliever.

- Objective ethos as additional anthropological data within the corporate church occurring in a non-nomological order.

51. The Church As a Corporate Community

- The church functions as a corporate community, operating as a single entity, though of many members. It acts externally and internally as a whole..
- The corporate character of the church is explicit only in its relationship to Christ in his continuing incarnation. What keeps the body of Christ united and functioning as a whole is its relationship to Christ, namely, Christ's continuing incarnation in the church's life.

52. Use and Limitation of Ethical "We" Formulas

- The language of the church is not "I" language, but "we" language. Distinguishing between the cumulative and the collective "we." The original Nicene Creed begins "WE believe in one God." That is the body as a whole confessing its faith, not just one "I." The difference between cumulative and collective "We" statements is that cumulative "we" designate what all of us are doing together. "We are all in church today." Even "each one of here is confessing the Nicene Creed." But the WE of that creed is collective "we," the confession of the entire body of Christ throughout history, and not just the folks at church this morning. Christians engage in cumulative "we" because each of them has the same Christ-connection. Christ has forgiven each one of them.
- But when word and sacrament are administered the "collective we," the body of Christ as a corporate

entity is on the scene. Here is objective ethos—the whole body doing something that God calls “good”—expressing itself in corporiety. Objective ethos is concrete public action.

53. The Order of Love and Forgiveness

- The new order in the church can be seen and heard, first off as a new jig-saw puzzle network (Seinsgefüge) of love and forgiveness.
- Objective ethos is Christian not merely by virtue of the motivation for the action, but because actual help occurs.
- The new order of love is purely voluntary. No coercion. It is the love-one-another generated by the gospel.
- The newness of the new order is that Christ stands not only in our relationship to God, but also in our relationship to one another.
- Church discipline as part of the order of love and forgiveness, loving care for an apostate former Christian

54. The “We” of the Apologists, Martyrs, and Confessions

- Individual Christians on the witness stand for the faith (apologists), those who die for the faith (martyrs) and the “we” in the Confessions is collective we. Though individuals are making the statements, they are speaking for the entire church, even more, they are speaking for Christ, the church’s head.

55. The Liturgical “We”

- In the liturgical “we” the collective “we” concretizes itself purposely before its Lord to worship him.
- Liturgical ethos is a fourfold collective event: 1) Communal confession of guilt; 2) Public proclamation

of God's law and gospel 3) Corporate absolution in the eucharist; and 4) Collective adoration as the individual member surrenders his isolation in collective concentration on the Lord.

- In using music in worship the church conquers a new realm of creation (music = an "order" from the old creation) for the kingdom of grace.

56. Ecclesiastical Law and the Levels of the "We"

- Who is really authorized to speak for the collective "we"? With all the denominations and divisions in the church, which human voices speak for the "whole church," even more speak for the head of the church?
- The Roman Catholic answer to the dilemma is the Bishop of Rome, understood to have been appointed by Christ the head, and then canon law whereby it preserves unity at all levels.
- Since the church is an order of the gospel and not an order of law (not even "divine law"), canon law cannot perform the unifying function the Roman church assigns to it.

57. Anti-Comminality and Unity

- The modern ecumenical movement offers both valid and invalid aspects of the move to conquer disunity.
- What creates the church's unity is what links sinners to Christ. It is the "pure" Gospel that does that alongside sacraments administered "according to that Gospel." The Gospel's verdict "your sins are forgiven" is the creator of church unity. Elert concludes with a Luther citation: "Wherever you find baptism, the Lord's supper, and the Gospel proclaimed, there kneel and pray, for the church is a house of prayer, and Christ has made that house as wide as the whole world." And then he adds this comment: "That is, so it seems to me, a truly

ecumenical and catholic statement. It just might be that this alleged chief culprit in splitting the church has actually shown the right way to overcome it."

Chapter 10. THE CHURCH AND FORCES OF HISTORY

58. Orders and Powers

- The church is an historical and social institution, a new "order" planted among all the other orders of old creation. [See the laundry list in chapter 3 above.]
- Orders and powers must be distinguished. Orders are the given "playing" fields on which we live our lives. It is on these playing fields that people with power—parents, workers, citizens, "the powers that be"—exercise the power they have. The "order" of the church does not run alongside the other orders (as parallel railroad tracks), but intersects with all the orders when some one member of the body of Christ is also in that "old" order.

59. Church and State [I will simply list here the segments of this long excursus on church and state. Elert's vast collection of data and his depth analysis is more than I can reduce to thesis sentences.

- The institutions of church and state as they intersect as a relationship of differing orders.
- The institutions of church and state as they intersect in a relationship based on power.
- The history of church-state identification in eastern Christendom.
- History of church-state relations in western Christendom.
- The Reformation understanding of the church-state relationship.

- The return of the church-state relationship the 20th century to the historical conditions of the first century. The conclusion (written in 1948!): “All the world powers today are engaged in an actual war of political ideas. Ideological warfare is now the state’s agenda.” An ideology is an “other” gospels. Thus the state is no longer simply God’s agent for protection and just recompense of its citizens. It now also proclaims an other gospel. “Thus the long history of church-state relationships returns to its beginning in the first century.”

60. Nonviolence as Possibility [German: The anarchist possibility.]

- Is it possible, as Tolstoy proposed, to have human society with no governing agents at all? Can evil be restrained by non-resistance, as he thought? Not really.
- Tolstoy’s teaching of non-resistance understands evil to arise from human ignorance, and thus to be rectified by insight and education. But that vastly underestimates evil. Evil is a perverse “order” with “power” in opposition to God in God’s world. Removing human ignorance does not remove evil. God has ordained secular power to restrain evil and protect us from evil’s destruction.

61. Lutheran “Dichotomy”? [German is “Doppel-Geleisigkeit”]

- The German term was Troeltsch’s negative term for Lutheran ethics. Running on a double track. Love as the ethical mandate for the individual, coercive power as the mandate for the state. This section is a long argument with Troeltsch [and his followers, such as the two Niebuhr brothers in the USA] and can’t easily be reduced to thesis sentences. Elert concludes by contrasting the “law of love”—God’s

mandate for humankind in all the orders of nomological existence—with Christ's "new" love-commandment. He articulates his own case for Luther's two-kingdoms. The corporate ethos of Christ's agape-fellowship cannot be merged into God's legally structured world. "These two cannot be reconciled because they are fundamentally different—not only different orders, but different historical forces. These opposites cannot be transformed into parallels running side by side and never intersecting."

62. The Growth of Brotherhood in the World

- Elert takes the term "brotherhood" from the frequent references in the NT to "the brothers," another corporate designation for the church as a whole, a community. This brotherhood is a mission term with the assignment to be intent on adding brothers/sisters to the fellowship. The fellowship as a community impacts "secular" history. It is constantly intent on expansion. The very mandate of one-another-love (always in the plural in the NT) calls for outreach to the other, not only in word, but in deed.
- Disappearance of the conditions of brotherhood in the church came when Constantine designated Christian faith the religion of the empire. The brotherhood no longer was a "subversive" movement in society to gain new brothers, but society was officially Christian. Mission accomplished. Clergy did the church's work and "brotherhood" went into the monasteries.
- The brotherhood active in the world is essential to the life of the church. Luther called the brotherhood out of the monasteries and back into the

world and also organized “brotherhood” actions in social ministry. But the secularization of society in the West has made it more difficult to carry out.

- Elert concludes articulating a mission theology for brotherhood-growth in the fractured modern world. It unfolds within the orders of nomological existence, initially supporting them, while at the same time undermining the nomological ethos. “In these (seemingly low-key, un-glorious) ways Christian brotherhood expands out into the world, even though the statisticians don’t notice it. That’s what makes it powerful in human history.”

63. Teleology and Eschatology

- These two terms are two different ways of understanding human history—and church history—moving to its conclusion. At root one is a law-term, the other a Gospel-term.
- What has been said above about the church as brotherhood in history and changing history is hard to document from the data at hand. It is marked by a “not yet.” “The “telos” end has not yet arrived. But “teleology” entails designating a goal, moving toward it, and (eventually) saying you have “arrived.”
- But the power of the Christian brotherhood lies not in what has been achieved but in its ongoing exercise of Christ’s mission.
- All proposals of chiliasm in church history are attempts to fix the “telos” of the kingdom of God in history..
- All modern international ideologies have grown in this soil initially prepared by the church. Stalin, Hitler were chiliasts. Western democracies are not far removed “fully convinced that they are the

political representatives of a Christian, universalistic, progressive reform movement” even modern democracies are chiliastic.

- Christian eschatology centers on God’s new verdict about the world in Christ, which leads to this final paragraph in the book. “The final day of reckoning will recapitulate the entire history of the world and render God’s conclusive verdict. World history gravitates toward this goal, but not of itself. The world powers do not aim toward it because they do not know it exists. The Christian brotherhood believes that goal, but does not know the when or how. The One who is himself beginning and end, alpha and omega, moves history to this goal. Eschatology includes teleology, a goal, but only the teleology of God. For that reason the entire Christian ethos—subjective ethos under law and grace, objective ethos as well— is teleological. It yearns for the end of all things that God has in store for us, when finally the data of history, things past, things forgotten—and above all, the eternal— will be revealed. The judge of the living and the dead will then reveal the final verdict, showing everyone who we finally are.”

“Missio Shaped by Promissio: Luth Missiology Confronts the

Challenge of Religious Pluralism"

Crossings Conference, Belleville, IL- 1/26/10

Rev. Jukka Kaariainen

Not all words are created equal. Some are more important than others. The Christian tradition gives us a rich vocabulary, words such as: salvation, reconciliation, faith, promise, law, Gospel, covenant, sin, grace, mission, and witness, to name but a few. In considering the specific topic the Church's "mission," mission has become a polyvalent symbol, with many definitions. Is mission Gospel proclamation, evangelism, common witness, *missio Dei*, liberation, work for peace and justice, humanization, prophetic dialogue, inculturation, or contextualization?1 Yes. Recent book titles reflects this diversity and lack of consensus, titles such as: "What is Mission?" "Mission Under Scrutiny," and "Concepts of Mission." Stephen Neill, commenting on such diversity, has noted, "If everything is mission, nothing is mission."2 The same concern applies to the Gospel itself: *If everything is Gospel, nothing is Gospel*.

Critics, following Gustav Warneck's lead, have argued that Lutheran theology, to the extent it utilizes Luther and the Luth Confessions, provides no real resources for a contemporary, relevant missiology. The late David Bosch agrees: "We miss in the Reformation not only missionary action 'but even the idea of missions, in the sense in which we understand them today.'"3

Our conference theme is "God's Promise, Our Mission: Making the Crucial Link." In tackling this theme, I wish to argue that the

words “Gospel” and “mission” are absolutely central, and that the word “promise” is a “promising link” (pun intended!) for relating the two, since the nature of both Gospel and Christian mission are grounded in the promises of God. The notion of “promise” not only holds faithfulness with the Christian tradition and relevant engagement in mission together, but it is able to do so precisely because it articulates the very essence of what *both* the Gospel *and* Christian mission are all about. While Lutheran theologians- Ingemar Oberg and Klaus Detlev Schulz, to name but two- have recently endeavored to write a Lutheran theology of mission, I humbly submit that their arguments fail to focus on and utilize the Gospel as promise and the Law-Gospel distinction as absolutely central. Therefore: my thoughts are meant both as a gentle, corrective nudge to fellow Lutherans, as well as a humble proposal to the wider ecumenical and mission crowd. Here’s my argument in a nutshell: 1) For Luther and the Lutheran Confessions, the Gospel is a promise. 2) The nature of the Gospel should shape/ direct the nature of mission. 3) Therefore, promise should be a central category in defining and understanding mission. I will now try to unpack the implications of these claims, aiming at practical engagement and application to the situations you find yourselves in.

For more than 50 years, mission theology has been defined by the category of *missio Dei*, the mission of God. Francis Oborji gives a basic definition of *missio Dei*: Mission is primarily God’s activity, not the church’s activity. God moves toward the world through the church, as an instrument of mission. The church’s reason for existence *is* the *missio Dei*, not the other way around.⁴ While the phrase *missio Dei* has been widely accepted and used by virtually all mission theologians, its actual meaning and content is vigorously contested. Wilhelm Richebacher describes the current quagmire: “It seems that everyone reads into and out of this ‘container definition’ whatever he or she

needs... Is such a term of any use at all, if it does not help us establish a clear single interpretation of the central concept? Should we give up this formula altogether...?"⁵ The title of his article bluntly asks: "*Missio Dei*: the Basis for Mission Theology, or a Wrong Path?" In concluding this introduction, I want to offer two very different definitions of *missio Dei* in order to draw a sharp contrast between the alternatives before us today. On the one hand, Stanley Samartha explains the task of mission in these terms:

In a pluralistic religious world Christians and their neighbors from other religious backgrounds are called to take part [together] in God's continuing mission to the world. Mission means continuing God's work through the Spirit to mend what is broken in the whole of creation, to overcome the destruction of humankind, and to heal the rift between God, nature, and humanity.

We'll return to Samartha's definition of the *missio Dei* later on as we examine one contemporary Roman Catholic model of *missio Dei*, that of Jacques Dupuis. On the other hand, Klaus Detlev Schulz describes *missio Dei* in these terms:

The *missio Dei* is the trinitarian redemptive and reconciling activity in history, motivated by God the Father's loving will for the entire world, grounded in the atoning work of Jesus Christ, and carried out by the Holy Spirit of Christ through the means of grace. God justifies [us] through the means of grace; delivers [us] from rebellion, sin, and death; subjects [us] under His kindly reign; and leads the redeemed community toward the final goal in history.⁶

The rest of my talk will unfold in five parts: 1) *Missio Dei*: one mission or two? 2) Lutheran resources for doing mission, 3) a Lutheran theology of revelation, 4) a theology of the cross

utilizing the hiddenness of God, and 5) concluding hunches.

I) **Missio Dei: One Mission or Two?**

While I believe *missio Dei* is indeed a helpful, category, the very “structure of Lutheranism” (Werner Elert) would insist that this term requires nuancing: Does God have one or two missions to the world? This question directs us to the nature of the Gospel as giving Christian mission a distinctively dual or “duplex” shape (Ed Schroeder). God’s mission always manifests itself in the dual form of law and Gospel, wrath and promise, judgment and mercy. Such is the Lutheran claim. In other words: *missio Dei* is shaped by *promissio Dei*, or *promissio* is the secret of *missio*.⁷ The law-Gospel distinction, while articulating and safeguarding the Gospel as promise, is more relevant than ever, and serves as a 21st century GPS in constructing a missiology that gets us “from here to there.” Most contemporary missiologies arising from the basis of *missio Dei*, whether employing a “nature-grace” hermeneutic (RC theology) or a “sin-grace” hermeneutic (traditional Reformed theology), end up talking about grace and the Gospel in such a way that it *seems* that God has only one word to say, a word of loving grace. Lutherans find this problematic as addressing only half of the story, half of revelation, half of what needs to be confessed, trusted, and proclaimed.

Before we look at resources from Luther and the Confessions for constructing such a “duplex” missiology, I want to give you a taste of how differently a dual, law/ promise missiology and “univocal” missiologies approach some important missional topics. 1) In terms of *grace*: is grace primarily nature fulfilled, expressed as humanity’s encounter with the God who reveals Himself as loving presence, or is grace the promise of mercy fulfilled on account of Christ, in contrast to the

judgment against sin? 2) Is the *Holy Spirit's work* conceived of primarily as discovering "traces of grace and truth" in other traditions, or does the Spirit create both the conviction of sin and trust (faith) in the Gospel promise? 3) *Covenant theology*: do the various Biblical and extra-biblical covenants manifest the progressive unfolding of the one, universal covenant of grace, or is the distinction between covenants of law and the covenant of promise crucial for appreciating the "new covenant" in Christ? 4) *The mediation of Jesus Christ*: is it to be understood in terms of an ontological mediation uniting human and divine natures, or is this mediation unique, differing from all other mediations by reconciling humanity to God through the forgiveness of sins? 5) *Reign of God*: is it "the dominion of God among human beings...reorienting human relations and organizing human society in accordance with God's intention"⁸, or is it constituted by and centered on the forgiveness of sins and promise of mercy delivered by Christ? 6) *The Church's proclamation*: do we announce the loving grace of God already present to all, or do we invite and exhort people to be reconciled to God through Christ? As one can see from this sketch of six missional themes, the conviction of a dual mission of God, rooted in the Gospel as promise and expressed by the law-Gospel distinction, results in a distinctively alternative proposal within today's missiological landscape.

II) Lutheran Resources for Doing Mission

The following three components, in my humble opinion, form the backbone and "DNA" of a Lutheran missiology: 1) the Gospel as promise; 2) the law-Gospel distinction; and 3) a theology of the cross utilizing the hiddenness of God. In other words: a Lutheran approach which seeks to be missiologically fruitful must seriously grapple with how best to interrelate three crucial themes: 1) divine judgment (as expressed in the law of

God), 2) divine mercy (as expressed in the gospel of Christ), and 3) divine hiddenness (as expressed in a theology of the cross). I am indebted to Oswald Bayer for formulating this approach and, as far as I know, he is the only or first Lutheran theologian to do so. Whereas my Lutheran claim is that 1) the law accuses of sin and applies pressure, 2) the gospel promises comfort and freedom, and 3) God's hiddenness is terrifying, other proposals for mission not only largely overlook the theme of law and divine judgment, but also approach relating grace (Gospel) and divine hiddenness very differently, resulting in a radically different missiology. Like a 3-legged stool, I believe that all three legs—divine judgment, divine mercy, divine hiddenness—are crucial, and that to the extent one is missing or marginalized, to that extent Lutheran missiology falls flat on its face. But I'm getting ahead of myself...

When we turn to the Lutheran Confessions, we find these components explicitly spelled out. What is the motivating concern of the Lutheran confessors, what made them tick? First, that Christ be properly honored, that the benefits of Christ be utilized and not wasted. As Melanchthon put it, "To know Christ is to know His benefits," or "For one has to distinguish the promises from the law in order to recognize the benefits of Christ."⁹ Secondly that consciences be properly comforted. One place where the hermeneutical function of the L/G distinction for rightly interpreting Scripture is spelled out in terms of these concerns is the *Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration (FCSD), Article V "Concerning Law and Gospel,"*

The distinction between law and gospel is a particularly glorious light. It serves to divide God's Word properly [cf. 2 Tim. 2:15] and to explain correctly and make understandable the writings of the holy prophets and apostles. Therefore, we must diligently preserve this distinction, so as not to mix these two teachings and make the gospel into a law. For this

obscures the merit of Christ and robs troubled consciences of the comfort that they otherwise have in the gospel when it is preached clearly and purely. With the help of this distinction these consciences can sustain themselves in their greatest spiritual struggles against the terror of the law.¹⁰

Apology Article IV sums it up: "All Scripture should be divided into these two main topics: the law and the promises. In some places it communicates the law. In other places it communicates the promise concerning Christ."¹¹

Not only is the law/ gospel distinction fundamental for the Confessions, but likewise it forms the very heart of Luther's theology. As Eric Gritsch and Robert Jenson put it:

For Luther, to do theology... meant constantly to distinguish between the history of salvation, heralded in the gospel, and the history of condemnation, proclaimed in the law. The decisive point of Luther's theology was the "correct distinction between law and gospel." Law and gospel are God's ways of dealing with the world. The law reveals sin, the gospel discloses salvation. Thus law and gospel are the ways in which God reveals himself as the god who justifies the ungodly.¹²

Let's try to highlight how differently the theme of divine hiddenness can be approached by asking some questions. As a starting point for discerning divine hiddenness in creation: is creation inherently graced, or has creation fallen *from* grace, *into* sin, and in desperate need of divine reconciliation and restoration? What is the nature of the task of exploring divine hiddenness: to discover and identify "traces of grace and truth" throughout creation, or a clearer discernment of how God's law is operative throughout creation, caring for and preserving it? Furthermore, what is the goal of exploring divine hiddenness: to

discern how the “grace of Christ” is already implicitly operative in other religions, or a deeper appreciation of how the grace of Christ, as the promise of mercy realized, is *not* explicitly known and trusted and therefore all the more needed? How does the nature of the Gospel as truly “good” and “new” news shape what we look for and expect to find in exploring the hiddenness of God?

III) Theology of Revelation

Since clarity regarding a Lutheran theology of revelation is crucial for constructing a Lutheran missiology, we now turn to flesh out some core convictions regarding revelation, some of which I have already alluded. A helpful starting point is Bob Bertram’s familiar axiom- “Biblical hermeneutics is at no point separable from Biblical soteriology.”¹³ In other words: One’s understanding of what constitutes salvation is intimately related to, and definitively shapes, how one interprets Scripture.

I believe the concept of revelation has become inflated in contemporary theology. Carl Braaten describes this development:

There is good reason to question the dominant role that revelation plays in modern theology. Revelation is not the supreme category of Christian dogmatics; salvation is! The supremacy of revelation [as a category] assumes that the basic human predicament is the lack of the knowledge of God. However, from a biblical perspective... the fundamental human predicament is the enslavement of the human will to the powers of sin, death, and the Devil. Then reconciliation- not revelation that answers to the question of knowledge- becomes the key category because it answers to the question of sin as estrangement. Furthermore, when revelation becomes the focal point... it relegates Jesus Christ primarily to the role of

revelation... We hold... a twofold revelation of God... not only of God's redemptive love in Jesus Christ but also of God's law through the structures of creation. It is essential to draw a proper distinction between revelation and salvation. Not all revelation is salvific; there is also the revelation of divine wrath and judgment through world historical events and personal experiences. Jesus Christ is not the sole revelation of God... The truly unique thing that happens in Christ is God's act of reconciliation.¹⁴

This quote directs us to the crux of the problem, from a Lutheran perspective: While much of contemporary *missio Dei* theology focuses on articulating how people can have knowledge of God as they work together to establish the reign of God, the underlying assumption is that such knowledge always salvific. The law-Gospel distinction questions this assumption.

In what follows, I will be engaging one specific proposal for mission, that of the late Roman Catholic theologian Jacques Dupuis, as representing some prevalent emphases in contemporary missiology, including the emphasis on revelation as revealing primarily, or only, God's loving grace. While Dupuis never identified his own proposal as representing *missio Dei*, and while many Protestants would object to some of his philosophical underpinnings, I believe his approach exemplifies some key emphases in *missio Dei* theology which my Lutheran proposal would critique and enrich. My intention is not to be polemical; simply to offer a concrete proposal to which my Lutheran approach offers a law/Gospel alternative.

I wish to ask two diagnostic questions: 1) "*What gets revealed?*" and 2) "*How is it revealed?*" For Dupuis' proposal, and for much of contemporary missiology, the "what" of divine revelation consists of God's self-communication and self-manifestation as grace. This is always, everywhere, by definition, gracious and

salvific. In terms of “how,” this gracious, divine self-communication is conveyed through foundational anthropology, which becomes elaborated as a view of how other religious traditions serve as “participated mediations” of the “one mediation” of salvation in Christ. One can see how this is congruent with Stanley Samartha’s earlier claim that Christians and their non-Christian neighbors are together engaged in God’s mission to the world. In this approach, experiences of God are, by and large, gracious.

1) *“What gets revealed?”* and 2) *“How is it revealed?”* For my Lutheran proposal the “what” of divine revelation centers of the distinction between law and Gospel promise. Simply put: *God speaks and reveals two words which are so diametrically opposed and contradictory that their reconciliation requires God to sacrifice, not only Jesus Christ as the reconciling atonement for human sin, but seemingly God’s logical coherence as well.* The gospel is the promise of God’s grace as reconciling the intractable problem created by the law’s demands and human sinfulness, with grace specifically defined as the promise of mercy realized for Christ’s sake.

How is this law-Gospel distinction, and the understanding of grace it implies, conveyed? Through the performative Word of God, proclaimed in its various forms (written, oral, sacramental) and active through the power of the risen, glorified Christ and his Spirit. It is received through faith as trust in the divine promises. God’s Spirit freely binds itself to this Word, not only convicting people of sin but also driving them to the comfort of the Gospel’s promise. I believe these two questions, *“What gets revealed?”* and *“How is it revealed?”* highlight basic differences between “univocal” missiologies such as Dupuis’, and my “duplex” Lutheran approach.

“Biblical hermeneutics is at no point separable from Biblical

soteriology.” What Dupuis fundamentally believes about the nature of salvation definitively shapes his understanding of the nature of the gospel, grace, covenants, the reign of God— in other words, his view of salvation determines, not just how he reads Scripture, but also how he “reads” the world of religious pluralism as he articulates his inclusive pluralism.

For theologians like Rahner and Dupuis, Christ’s incarnation means that salvation consists of God’s loving, self-communication to all people everywhere. Passages such as I Tim 2:4 (“For God wants all to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.”) and Eph 1:10 (“to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ”) are filtered through Karl Rahner’s transcendental anthropology to mean that God is universally present to all people in saving grace, not only as an eschatological possibility, but as a present reality in and through their religions. From this perspective, it becomes possible to view sin, as Dupuis does, as a relatively minor “bump in the road” on the way to communion and union with God. Once the problem of sin is marginalized, the law-Gospel distinction becomes largely irrelevant, and it becomes plausible to look for “traces of grace and truth” in other religions as signs of God’s saving presence. God is universally present, bestowing universal salvation, and the evidence of this is “signs of grace and truth.” What Dupuis believes about the nature of salvation, within his Rahnerian framework, inevitably shapes how reads Scripture and, by extension, religious pluralism. We live in a graced horizon. In terms of the second question, *how* is this revealed, Dupuis would view other religious traditions as participating in and legitimately expressing, through their own structures, the saving grace of Christ.

In contrast to Dupuis’ approach of emphasizing Christ’s incarnation and viewing grace as God’s universal, loving

presence to all, my Lutheran approach prioritizes a theology of the cross and a robust theology of sin as centrally important. 1) *The overcoming of sin*, rather than a marginal aspect of salvation, becomes its central dilemma: how to reconcile sinful humanity to God in a manner that does justice to both divine love and justice, mercy and holiness. 2) The law-gospel distinction, in addressing the depth dimension of sin, becomes central in articulating the nature of salvation and grace. 3) While divine truth permeates creation, including the world religions, such traces of truth would not be identified as "traces of grace," since the reconciling grace of Christ is not yet being explicitly trusted as good news. Again, Lutheran soteriology is integral to Lutheran hermeneutics: salvation as the promise of mercy and reconciliation, fulfilled in the work of Christ on the cross, leads to the law-Gospel distinction and a distinctive approach to religious pluralism, centered on God's hiddenness both in the cross and in the world. *The realities of law, Gospel, and divine hiddenness, understood in terms of the cross and filtered through the cross, shape what can and cannot be affirmed in terms of God's grace in the world.*

Unlike Dupuis, my Lutheran model intentionally refrains from elaborating how this saving work of Christ reaches people beyond the bounds of the proclaimed Word, leaving that within the realm of unrevealed mystery. In balancing the poles of God's universal, saving will (John 3:16, I Tim. 2:4) and salvation through Christ alone, it unambiguously affirms both truths- God wants to save all people, and God saves through Christ alone- while insisting that the mechanics of *how* God could or will save those who have never heard the Gospel remains a mystery.

The distinction between law and Gospel is centrally illuminative and crucial to properly relating the actions of God's two hands, the Word and the Spirit, within the one economy of salvation. The "verbal" dialectic between the conflicting Words of God's

law and God's promise shapes how Word and Spirit should properly be related. To the extent that God's speech to humanity is understood as largely grace, to that extent the relationship between Word and Spirit is open to distortion or misunderstanding.

In other words: When the accusatory function of the divine law and judgment of sin are overlooked, the core, promissory nature of the gospel as divine-human reconciliation and the forgiveness of sins is obscured or insufficiently emphasized. Without a clear, robust theology of the law, a theology of the gospel as promise of God loses its sharp focus. This problematic highlights the importance of maintaining *both* terms of a key, Scriptural pairing (e.g. law and gospel, sin and grace, flesh and spirit, bondage and freedom, old creation and new creation, etc.). Whenever one term in such pairs is lost or marginalized, the remaining term loses the sharp focus of its core meaning. This is precisely what happens when the gospel, gospel values, and traces of grace are used in missiology without a solid anchoring in the divine law and human sinfulness. Simply put: without a deep appreciation of the role of sin and the divine law, the core nature of the gospel as promise of mercy becomes distorted.

How then might we understand the relationship between the Word and the Spirit? A Lutheran theology of the Spirit, incorporating the law-Gospel distinction, understands the Spirit's work as conveying God's dual mission, that of judgment against sin (law) and promise of mercy (gospel). Oswald Bayer expresses this well:

If the Holy Spirit calls only "through the gospel," but the gospel is gospel only as it is distinguished from the law, then the distinction between law and gospel is decisive with respect to... pneumatology, as well. Thus the work of the Spirit is, first of all, to sharpen the law and to bring about God's

judgment against sin; only then does the Spirit work through the second and final Word of God, the gospel, in that he forgives sin and creates faith...¹⁵

The fact that Dupuis largely ignores the law's function in judging sin inevitably means that, in his theology of the Spirit, the Spirit always and only discovers "gospel values," "traces of truth and grace," and "the Christian spirit" manifested as love,¹⁶ rather than accentuating the reality of human brokenness and sin. In this way, what constitutes gospel shifts decisively from a solid anchoring in the Scriptural promise of forgiving mercy to something else.

My critique of much of contemporary *missio Dei* theology boils down to this: one cannot sufficiently understand the *gospel* without a sufficiently robust understanding of the *law*, just as one cannot sufficiently understand divine *grace* without a sufficiently robust understanding of *sin*. One cannot understand the gospel without the law, and one cannot understand divine grace without sin. In terms of both the law-gospel and sin-grace dialectic, when the categories of "law" and "sin" are overlooked, "gospel" and "grace" are likewise distorted. In such missiological proposals, the "center of gravity" shifts from the gospel as *promissio Dei* and grace as the promise of mercy fulfilled, to some other basis, whether it be Rahnerian, transcendental anthropology (as in the case of some RC models), an understanding of the reign of God as an interreligious reality, a common striving for peace and justice, or something else.

IV) A Theology of the Cross and God's Hiddenness

Lutheran theology insists that God's "alien work" of judging human sin in the event of the cross (the Law) serves God's

“proper work” of justifying and reconciling sinners (the Gospel). Such a theology of the cross is deeply paradoxical. While a Lutheran theology of mercy as promise realized, utilizing the law-gospel distinction, best preserves and articulates the dynamics of Biblical salvation, I submit that the category of God’s hiddenness (*deus absconditus*) serves as a bridge between a Lutheran theology of mercy and the broader context of religious pluralism. As a theology of promise, a Lutheran proposal for mission is best able to establish a point of contact and dialogue with other religions *when it seriously engages them through the category of God’s hiddenness, a category which is readily understood by other religions*. In doing so, such a Lutheran proposal makes a distinctive contribution to interreligious dialogue, raises important questions for others and itself to consider, and opens itself up for genuine dialogue with and questioning from other religious traditions.

First of all, the hiddenness of God is a helpful category for navigating the ambiguity of actual human experience. It is a useful tool in at least three ways: 1) it establishes a bridge toward religious pluralism, 2) connects Lutheran missiological discourse with the wider, fractured, postmodern discourse, as well as 3) offers, in the Gospel, a hopeful word in the midst of ongoing disintegration and catastrophes.

While all religions have hopeful words to say, they also wrestle with whether such words of grace will indeed be the final word. I wish to contend that the most important similarities and overlaps concerning human religious experience are best described, not by categories of *being or existence*, but rather as the paradoxical relationship between law and Gospel, divine wrath and promise, sin and grace, human brokenness and divine healing. Because human religious experience is ambiguous, left to our own devices, we don’t really quite know how to “read” or

interpret nature. The “hidden God” whom nature ambiguously reveals needs to be unveiled, in and through the revelation in Christ, if humanity is to have a gracious, trusting, salvific relationship with this God. As Ed Schroeder comments on the formulation, “There is grace, and there is grace,” by Melanchthon, “the ‘grace’ we encounter in our daily experience of God’s creation is something other than the ‘grace’ that comes in Jesus the Christ.”¹⁷

Lutheran theology, following Luther’s lead, urges serious inquirers of all faiths to turn from the “darkness” of the “absolute” God (the unknowable God, God in God’s inner being) to the mystery of Christ crucified. Luther’s emphatic claim, “The cross alone is our theology,”¹⁸ directs our attention to God’s paradoxical absence and presence, hiddenness and revelation, wrath and loving mercy, as those realities are conveyed in and through a theology of the cross.¹⁹

To the extent that a theology of the cross is helpful in interpreting and applying the Gospel as promise, to that extent it serves as a missiological tool. While other religions and philosophical systems have their own strategies for dealing with questions of divine hiddenness and human suffering, Lutheran theology would caution all such attempts to beware of exceeding their limits.

Not only does the ‘hiddenness of God’ underscore the important, Biblical distinction between God’s law and God’s promise, I submit it also provides a better theological basis and springboard for interreligious dialogue than inclusive pluralism does. Martin Luther, employing the hiddenness of God, commented in his explanation to the third article of the Apostles’ Creed:

These articles of the Creed, therefore, divide and distinguish us Christians from all other people on earth. All who are

outside the Christian Church, 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. They remain in eternal wrath and damnation, *for they do not have the Lord Christ*, and, besides, they are not illuminated or blessed by the gifts of the Holy Spirit (*italics added*).²⁰

Emphasizing the possessive verb '*have*' throughout his explanation of the Creed, Luther makes the crucial distinction between having a natural, "first article" relationship with God, based on creation, versus having a saving, "second article" relationship with God through Jesus Christ. All people have a 1st article relationship, by virtue of creation; only Christians have a 2nd article relationship, by virtue of the Gospel. As Melanchthon put it: "To know (have) Christ is to know His benefits." Luther saw the gospel, defined specifically as God's revelation of mercy fulfilled in Christ, as adding something significantly "good" and "new" to what sinners otherwise, by nature, do not have.²¹

Therefore: a Lutheran approach affirms that, while all people can inclusively, anonymously worship the one true God, their worship, apart from Christ, is deficient, literally Christ-less, and does not lead to salvation.²² Rather than a pejorative putdown, this distinction is meant to highlight and emphasize the *crucial connection between the God one explicitly 'has' and the benefits that God bestows*. As Luther observed, without Christ, people's worship lacks all kinds of important benefits: knowing God's attitude toward them, being confident of God's loving grace, enjoying the gifts of the Holy Spirit, etc. That is why Luther, commenting on the sailors in Jonah 1:5 ("All the sailors were afraid and each cried out to his own god."), asserts, "These men in the ship all know of God, but they have

no sure God.”²³ As Oswald Bayer notes: “The office of Christ is to make us certain of God.”²⁴

Luther emphasized a double relation of God to the world: *outside* of Christ, God is the absolutely free, majestic, and awesomely terrifying God of law; *in* Christ, God has freely chosen to bind and limit himself to the promissory Word of the Gospel and the sacraments. This fundamental tension which my Lutheran proposal insists must be at the center of any missiological proposal, is largely missing in contemporary missiology. However, it forms the framework within which a “duplex” *missio Dei* unfolds: *the hidden will of God* (the wrath of God, manifested in God’s law and divine hiddenness in creation) *seems to contradict and defeat God’s revealed will of saving grace for all*. A Christian missiology must not avoid this dilemma: how can it be resolved? While the Rahner-Dupuis solution is to dissolve the paradox by largely ignoring the law as God’s hidden will of wrath, my proposal directs us, not to resolution, but rather to trusting the promise entailed in the revelation of Christ crucified. With Luther, we urge people to flee from this hidden God to the revealed God in Jesus Christ.

What might be some of the implications of such a view of the hiddenness of God for relating God’s promise to our mission? At least three emerge. First, the triune God is truly, but never exhaustively, to be identified with the crucified Christ. There is much about God which we do not know and which will remain hidden, despite the revelation of God in Christ. In other words: “The image of God does not, after all, [exhaustively] coincide with the picture of Jesus.”²⁵ Secondly, the hidden God drives us to the revealed Word of God in Scripture and Christ because the hidden will offers neither guidance nor comfort. Thirdly, Christian mission talk requires further, nuanced sophistication, realizing that it always lives and breathes on a continuum, between the paradoxical tensions of the God beyond revelation

(the terrifying, unknown God) and the God revealed in crucified Christ.²⁶

V) Conclusion

In conclusion, based on the distinction between the hidden and revealed God, a Lutheran missiology offers six 'hunches' about the lived, faith experiences of adherents of other religions²⁷ (Ed Schroeder): 1) Nobody's daily religious experience is one of "pure grace" (contra Rahner). 2) To ground a theology of religions or interreligious dialogue on how various religions articulate their experiences of grace leaves huge areas of religious experience untouched, assuring that Christian grace, as the promise of mercy realized in Christ, will become blurred or marginalized. 3) The grace of God in Christ is not simply an unexpected, undeserved experience of diffuse 'goodness;' rather, it is a surprising word of mercy from our Creator whom we chronically mistrust, and to whom we owe an unending debt. 4) Should not the fact of Christian sinfulness- lack of faith, etc. – serve a central role in dialogue? Christians admit to being "simultaneously saints and sinners," and echo the Markan father's desperate cry, "Lord, I believe, help my unbelief (9:24)!" 5) Christians are no better in their moral performance than others; their claim is not about themselves, but rather about a gracious Word of promise they have heard and received, giving them hope for salvation against all evidence to the contrary. 6) To the extent that Christian theology is not enriched by listening to the experiences of God's hiddenness and absence in other faiths, to that extent Christian theology remains impoverished. This can and must be done in a spirit of humility, empathy, and hospitality, and yet deep commitment to our Lutheran confessional tradition as a point of departure and return.²⁸

While God's ways are ultimately higher than our ways, and His

thoughts higher than our thoughts, as we move out in mission and witness, we can take comfort in the promise that all the promises of God are “Yes” in Christ, and that this God of promise will never leave nor forsake us. I believe Bob Bertram’s classic quote serves as a guidepost for Lutherans who take both their confessional heritage and mission engagement seriously: “*Promissio* is the secret of *missio*. For the mission’s Sender was Himself the keeping of that promise. And the mission’s gaps, across which we move, are ultimately spanned by that same promise – of Himself by the Spirit through His Word.”²⁹ Thank you!

References:

- 1 David Bosch, in chapter 11 of his missiological masterpiece *Transforming Mission*, lists at least thirteen different elements of an “emerging ecumenical missionary paradigm,” namely mission as: the Church-with-others, *missio Dei*, mediating salvation, the quest for justice, evangelism, contextualization, liberation, inculturation, common witness, ministry by the whole people of God, witness to people of other living faiths (including dialogue), theology, and action in hope.
- 2 Stephen Neill, *Creative Tension* (London: Edinburgh House, 1959), 81.
- 3 David Bosch, *Transforming Mission* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1996), p 244.
- 4 Francis Oborji, *Concepts of Mission*, p. 135.
- 5 Wilhelm Richebacher, “*Missio Dei*: the Basis of Mission Theology or a Wrong Path?” *International Review of Mission*, Vol XCII, No. 367, 589.
- 6 Klaus D. Schulz, *Mission from the Cross: the Lutheran Theology*

of Mission (St Louis: Concordia, 2009), p. 97.

7 Robert Bertram, "Doing Theology in Relation to Mission," in *The Promising Tradition: a Reader in Law-Gospel Reconstructionist Theology* (St Louis: Concordia Seminary in Exile, 1974), pp. 419-441.

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9 *Book of Concord* 149.

10 Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (eds), *The Book of Concord: the Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, 581.

11 *Book of Concord* 121.

12 Eric Gritsch and Robert Jenson, *Lutheranism*, 48.

13 Robert Bertram, "The Hermeneutical Significance of Apology IV," in *The Promising Tradition: a Reader in Law-Gospel Reconstructionist Theology*, p. 2.

14 Carl Braaten, *That All May Believe*, pp. 12-13.

15 Oswald Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology: a Contemporary Interpretation*, p. 247.

16 Jacques Dupuis, *Christianity and the Religions*, p. 190 ff.

17 Edward Schroeder, "Encountering the Hidden God" in *Areopagus-a Living Encounter with Today's Religious World*. (Tao Fong Shan Christian Centre, Hong Kong, May 1993), p. 2.

18 Martin Luther in *Luther's Works* 25: 287.

19 I am acutely aware of the immensely complex nature of issues related to the hiddenness and unknowability of God, apophatic

and negative theologies, theology of the cross, and theodicy. While the limits of this study do not allow for more in-depth treatment of divine hiddenness and unknowability as they have been classically articulated by early Christian theologians as Pseudo-Dionysius, Gregory of Nyssa, Meister Eckhardt, and Maximus the Confessor, nor theologies of the cross of contemporary theologians such as Jurgen Moltmann, Eberhard Jungel, John Stuart Hall, and others, my aim is very modest: simply to suggest how the hiddenness of God, interpreted within the framework of a theology of the cross, can serve as a missiologically fruitful topic for interreligious dialogue.

20 Martin Luther, *The Large Catechism of Martin Luther* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1981), p. 61

21 Edward Schroeder, "Luther's Commentary on the Third Article as a Clue to His Theology of Other Religions" in *Missio Apostolica: Journal of the Lutheran Society for Missiology* VII: 1 (May 1999), p. 7.

22 Edward Schroeder, "Luther's Commentary on the Third Article as a Clue to His Theology of Other Religions" in *Missio Apostolica: Journal of the Lutheran Society for Missiology* VII: 1 (May 1999), p. 5.

23 Oswald Bayer, *Theology the Lutheran Way*, p. 75.

24 Oswald Bayer, *Theology the Lutheran Way*, p. 75.

25 Brian Gerrish, "'To the Unknown God': Luther and Calvin on the Hiddenness of God," *Journal of Religion* 53 (1973), p. 276.

26 Brian Gerrish, "'To the Unknown God': Luther and Calvin on the Hiddenness of God," *Journal of Religion* 53 (1973), p. 278.

27 Edward Schroeder, "Encountering the Hidden God" in *Areopagus-a Living Encounter with Today's Religious World*. (Tao Fong Shan

Christian Centre, Hong Kong, May 1993), pp. 4-5.

28 Catherine Cornille, *The Impossibility of Interreligious Dialogue* (New York: Crossroads, 2008).

29 Robert Bertram in *The Promising Tradition: A Reader in Law-Gospel Reconstructionist Theology* (St Louis: Concordia Seminary in Exile, 1974), 1.

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