

Participation in and Transformation by the Promise

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Orientation:

What we are about in this paper can be best understood as a gloss on Philippians 1: 4-6, and 8- 11:

In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus . . . And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ—to the glory and praise of God.

In the office of readings for the first weeks of “ordinary

time," in the Roman Catholic church's *Liturgy of the Hours* we are reading the book of Deuteronomy a chapter or so per day, followed by a text written by a father of the early church. I have been reminded forcefully in these readings that the "Law" is a great gift of God to his people. But taught by Paul the Apostle and one of his most significant modern interpreters, Martin Luther, I am also fully aware that the Gospel is not a new law, not even a new law of love, nor is it a social program. The Gospel of the New Covenant is, rather, an intensification and realization of the dominant theme of the Gospel of both Testaments – God is a God of promises. Concretely, God promises to save his people, and in Jesus we Christians believe we have the clearest revelation, indeed, the accomplishment of that promise, in the paschal mystery of Jesus of Nazareth – his *transitus* or passage from life through death to new life as he becomes the sender of the Holy Spirit, who is the inner witness to us that our sins indeed are forgiven and the first fruits of the realization that God's promises to us will be fulfilled. Yet that message appears to be too good, too simple, and not concrete enough for many.

In what follows, I seek to reflect on being transformed by God's promise, especially by celebrating the paschal mystery as the liturgical practice of remembering the promise and gathering around the table of the Lord that is the center of an authentic missional church. Why speak of being "transformed by the promise?" Because I am convinced that the reason people are so apt to reach out for now this and now that vogue cause and call it an integral aspect of putting the gospel into practice is that there is too little proof that ordinary Christians have, in fact, been transformed by participating in the paschal mystery – a mystery that includes the experience of rebirth in the Spirit.

To get at what I mean, I refer to a short section from a treatise entitled "On Spiritual Perfection" by Bishop Diadochus

of Photice, which is used in the office of readings for Friday in the second week in ordinary time that I mentioned above.

He is talking about the process whereby the human self diminishes and the new self is born, a self that truly loves God above all:

Anyone who loves God in the depths of his heart has already been loved by God. In fact the measure of a person's love for God depends upon how deeply aware that person is of God's love for him or her. When this awareness is keen, it makes whoever possesses it long to be enlightened by the divine light, and this longing is so intense that it seems to penetrate his very bones" (*Patrologia Graeca* 65, cols. 1171-72).

One of the key words above is "awareness," and the key idea is that our love for God is going to exist in proportion to our awareness of God's love for us. In the life stories of many of the great cloud of witnesses who are our forebears in faith, one of the key things we learn is that their knowledge of God stems from an awareness of God's grant of forgiveness for sin. It is certainly the case with Luther, for whom faith is the act of trusting the experience of forgiveness. Our problem in the church in the West today, I sometimes think, is that we have fallen into the hands of two professions: that of professional "theologians" and professional "pastors." Now many of my best friends are theologians and pastors. Indeed, some of the most exemplary Christians I know are theologians and pastors. And I am much in favor of the church having good theologians and well-prepared pastors. Nevertheless, to be a pastor, bishop, or theologian, it is not required (a) that one "know" God in the way Diadochus speaks of, nor (b) that one be skilled in leading others to that form of participative knowledge *in love* of God. I am talking, though, about these people as part of professions where the price of admission is academic excellence and

administrative talents. The principle requirement is not that of being skilled as mediators of wisdom and guides who can lead others into the path of being transformed by the Spirit whom Jesus promises in John 14: 16-22 when he says:

I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor to be with you forever– the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you. I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you. Before long, the world will not see me anymore, but you will see me. Because I live, you also will live. On that day you will realize that I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you. Whoever has my commands and obeys them, he is the one who loves me. He who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love him and show myself to him.

It is this sort of *knowing* Jesus and the Father as the God who first loves us, not *knowing ideas about them*, that Diadochus speaks of. And it is this sort of knowing that leads to transformation of one's inner being. It is the sort of love of God that we read of in Luke's gospel in Zechariah's song (Luke 1:76-79):

And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him, to give his people the *knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins*, because of the tender mercy of our God, by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace [my Italics].

There is a knowledge of God that comes from experiencing the forgiveness of our sins. If you read the gospels straight through with an ear to how often Jesus speaks of forgiving sins,

it is an amazing experience. It is not the sort of feeling one gets if a judge forgives a traffic violation. In fact, the word “forgiveness” itself may mislead us in our age. Something far deeper is at stake here, and it is not too much to say that Jesus’s miracles are worked to show that the one who has the power to heal and read people’s minds, also has the power to forgive sins and grant peace of heart and mind.

In the high priestly prayer, Jesus says:

Unless I go away, the Counselor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you. When he comes, he will convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment: in regard to sin, because men do not believe in me; in regard to righteousness, because I am going to the Father, where you can see me no longer; and in regard to judgment, because the prince of this world now stands condemned. I have much more to say to you, more than you can now bear. But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come (John 16: 7-13).

The gospel is a promise that God will (1) forgive our sins and (2) deal with us as he dealt with Jesus by bringing us and the entire cosmos to new life through death. But it is also a promise that the Holy Spirit will be the mode of God’s presence that will reveal those sins to us (“convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment” – John 16:8) and make us know both God’s righteousness in itself and the plan whereby God will make the world right.

Our mission as Christians is to become conscious participants in that plan, and it is predicated on “knowing” God in Christ Jesus. Not concepts about God and Christ and righteousness, but

knowing God and righteousness in Christ Jesus.

I purposely emphasize the word “know” here because it underlines a kind of knowing that appears in a relationship of love, not merely the kind of knowledge that comes from understanding intellectually the biblical ideas and “believing” these ideas about forgiveness. The kind of knowing one possesses when one is “in love” is different than mere conceptual knowledge. We are talking, then, of participation in God’s Trinitarian life, not primarily knowing concepts about the Trinity but knowing God as Father, Son, and Spirit, a knowledge that impels the Christian to trust the promises of God and to try to do his or her part in revealing God’s plan in the world and to the world. Our Pentecostal brothers and sisters and the great mystics have something to teach us who live in our heads without the knowledge that comes from a love that rises in our gut.

Mission in Relation to the Gospel as Promise and the Forgiveness of Sin

Rather against my own will, over the past several years I have been persuaded that many Christians use the words “gospel” and “mission” as much to obfuscate as to clarify what they are talking about. What I mean to say is that many make mission into anything a church might want to do. While I will not attempt to document my charge of obfuscation or confusion, I believe that the words “mission” and “gospel” are used in so many contradictory ways that one would be hard pressed to derive from church practice a definition that is biblically satisfying. To me this is a far greater scandal than the institutional disunity of the church.

What I am driving at is that the word “gospel” is often still equated with a form of new teaching or a new law propagated by Jesus. Far be it from me to deny the importance of doing good

works and trying to create a just world. Still, it is more faithful to the New Testament to see Christian mission as a *response* to having been gripped by the transforming power of the Spirit than as an obligation to implement a new teaching of Jesus. Catching that distinction makes all the difference.

The core New Testament meaning of the term gospel is clear. At the level of our earliest texts, the Pauline letters, the “good news” in the First Letter to the Thessalonians, for instance, revolves around the Thessalonians having received, in the power of the Spirit, confidence to turn to Jesus, trusting that God will raise the followers of Jesus, whom he has rescued from the wrath of God, just as he raised up Jesus (1 Thess 1: 2-10). The letter to the Romans is the longest and weightiest of Paul’s letters, but the word gospel boils down to good news about God’s power to save all who believe (Rom 1: 16-17). Faith itself is an act – aided by the Spirit giving testimony within – of placing total trust in Jesus as the Messiah (in the words of Romans 5: 1-5), an act wherein one experiences the consolation of being regenerated in the Spirit. Following the promptings of the Spirit, one experiences peace with God and a hope that does not disappoint made real by the Spirit.

In other words, the gospel is *promise* witnessed by the Spirit that God will act toward us as God has to Jesus, a promise, moreover, that the entire universe is being saved by God. In an historically and scientifically conscious age such as ours, the promise entails , as improbable as it may seem, the notion that world process in a 15-billion-year-old universe is in the hands of God. In that context we are invited by the Spirit to align ourselves with Jesus, to the point of following him through death to new life, becoming, as we join ourselves to the very *logos* (the [aboriginal] “plan”) of the universe, participants in a great eschatological venture (Rom 8: 18-30). The

Logos present at creation (Gen 1) becomes incarnate in Jesus, and the disciple who receives him dwells in the light of that Logos (John 1: 1-18).

Fundamental to the peace God gives in the Pauline version of the gospel (v.gr., 2 Thess 2: 7) is the reciprocal truth that, left to ourselves, humanity reverts to a state of rebellion repressing awareness of our true nature, missing the target or goal of life. Associating oneself with Christ, allowing the Spirit to illumine oneself to the nature of our plight as sinful, that is to say, quoting the old adage, being "convicted of 'sin'," (John 16: 8) is something different from the standard Western notion of recognizing that one has transgressed a law. The Greek words for sin in the New Testament are *anomia* (a state of being in lawless rebellion) and *hamartia* (being in a state of darkness and confusion about the purpose of life). The New Testament, in utilizing *anomia* and *hamartia*, takes over the Septuagint's Greek translation of a variety of Hebrew terms that we render in the single and most inadequate English word "sin". Bereft of the emotional weight and subtlety of both the Old and New Testament narratives, we run the risk of leading people astray if we repeat the formula that the gospel is a message about the forgiveness of sin. For the metaphor of God forgiving then becomes the metaphor of a judge who looks into our fundamentally good hearts and forgives us for the trivial offense of running a stop sign, so completely have the deeper dimensions of sin and its effects in the biblical language been reduced to transgressing a law. In our Freudian age, in addition, no one is really guilty of anything very serious, except perhaps not choosing one's parents wisely, thus having deficient brain chemistry because of genetic bad luck.

Have we perhaps become victims of the modern Western assumption that there is little wrong with ourselves as individuals that a little psychotherapy or a modern pharmacological miracle won't

cure? Little wrong in our nation that a better brand of politics won't cure? Little wrong in our world that a bit of tolerance or more just distribution of wealth won't cure?

I bring this section to a close with two observations. First, when one takes seriously the message of the Hebrew and Christian Testaments, they bring into relief the plight of humanity on earth as living in *anomia* and *hamartia*, a state of rebellious blindness, being mistaken about our nature and goal, being lost in the dark, a dimension of the state of "original sin" that is not captured by the word "sin" in its common usage in English.

Second, gospel and mission are related. Christian mission revolves around helping human beings not just hear a message about Jesus. Rather, at its deepest level, if one reads the gospel

of the Apostle Paul with the pores of one's heart and soul open, *mission is our task of inviting others to participate in the reality of God-with-us revealed in the heart by the Spirit*. Mission itself is a secular word, as we all know. Certainly one can trace mission to the Greek words *apostellō*, *apostellethai*, and *apostolos* ("to send," "to be sent," and "the one sent"), but the point I want to make as I conclude this section is that being sent into Christian mission is intrinsically related to the word gospel, *euaggelion*, "good news," and that always has to do with Jesus as the one who delivers us from the effects of sin, both as *hamartia* ("being on the wrong track") and *anomia* ("being in rebellion"). Forgiveness (*charizomai*, see Col 2:13; 2 Cor 10, 12, 13 and *aphesis* and *aphienai* in the synoptics and Acts, see Acts 3:19) has resonances of encountering the loving mercy of God who "blots out" and "remits" the "debts" (*opheliēmata*, see Mt 6:12) one piles up in the darkness of sin, *even if one never intentionally does anything wrong*.

Stanislas Lyonnet, S.J., (please forgive the use of "man/he"

below when he speaks of humanity in an age before gender neutral language reached Rome) sums up the New Testament teaching on sin and forgiveness memorably when he concludes:

Man cannot be liberated from the tyranny of sin except by receiving a new dynamism, the life-giving Spirit, the Spirit of God, the only source of life. For sin was a power of death, dwelling in man, separating him from God and leading him to perdition. Christ liberated man from the slavery of sin through a mediation accomplished in a supreme act of obedience and of love, in which we participate in baptism and the Eucharist. Thus can the sinner pass from hate to love: Man's mind is not only rectified, but re-ordained in love (Lyonnet and Sabourin 1972, 57).

Lyonnet's conclusion of a rigorous analysis of the Biblical teaching on sin in a liturgical key resonates in me, because the point of this paper is to propose that the concept and practice of mission reflect the richness of Scripture only if they reflect the life of churches that are zones of celebration of the gospel, or, as Catholics often put it, "celebration of the paschal mystery." Liturgical life rooted in ancient practice can be a remedy for the tendency to reduce our understanding of Christ and his church to that of a problem solver conceived in mostly functional or instrumentalist terms. In the view being advanced here, the prime role of mission is that of "unveiling truth" as symbolic, liturgical action that complements and deepens verbal teaching and draws one deeper into the mystery of God's promise than words alone can do.

Church as a Zone of Celebration of Gospel

I was once asked by Edward Schroeder, who more than any other has helped me to realize that the good news of the gospel is a promise about Christ's role in the forgiveness of sin: "What do

Catholics mean by the term ‘celebrate the paschal mystery’?” Like many seemingly straightforward questions, Ed’s question made me reconsider things that I had long assumed I understood but that, in fact, I had insufficiently reflected on. The more I reflected on it, the clearer it became that the fundamental meaning of “celebrate the paschal mystery” is “celebrate the gospel.” Both point to the context of mission as our part in God’s great promise. To make sense of the radicality of these terms, though, I need to go back to a bit of shared history that, in my opinion, has blown many Christians off course.

Beginning late in the last century, when Adolph von Harnack and friends began to apply the fruits of the *wissenschaftlich* historical method to sorting out what we knew reliably about early Christianity, a number of Catholic scholars were also using the new research methods with a different spirit. The enemy of getting to the pure gospel and purest early Christianity for Protestant scholars was encapsulated after Harnack in the term *Frühkatholizismus* (“early Catholicism”), a plastic term that traces their discovery of pagan, Hellenistic elements, nascent clerical hierarchies and the encroachment of ecclesiastical powers in intertestamental times (see, for instance, Harnack, 1978, 190-207). By the mid-second century such *Frühkatholisch* and Hellenistic deviations, they noted, had become nearly universal in Western Christianity. Needless to say, they did not approve of this early “Catholicizing.”

Catholic historians – and I refer especially to Benedictine monks who were examining the roots of Catholic liturgy – were also finding pagan, Hellenistic elements and *Frühkatholizismus*, but because of their quite different view of the role of tradition, they came to a different conclusion. Instead of deviation, they detected the hand of the Holy Spirit helping the church unpack the surplus of meaning contained in the Scriptures and the ongoing life of the church in the Mediterranean world.

They were enthralled by discovering the extraordinary degree to which Christians in the first century and onward were guided by the Spirit to subvert for Christian purposes the Hellenistic manner of celebrating the mysteries of the pagan cults. They saw the early church converting pagan ideas and customs to structure the celebration of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus as the *mysterion* of God's deliverance of the human race from *hamartia* and *anomia*. While not using the language of "inculturation" in today's missiological sense, they saw the employment of Hellenistic religious language and philosophy as translating Hebrew and Aramaic traditions of intertestamental Judaism wherein Second Temple worship brought Israel into living contact with Yahweh. (For a good summary of this material, see Wainright and Tucker 2006, 1- 130.)

Absent this sense of sin and participating existentially in deliverance from sin and coming into communion with Jesus as the *logos* of God incarnate, liturgy becomes a place for moral instruction. Jesus himself is demoted to the status of teacher like Siddhartha Gautama or Confucius, and mission becomes the foreign aid branch of the Western church, which is itself mainly the diminishing portion of Western culture that prays. Ultimately, faith becomes an act of subjective assent to doctrines emptied of the act of totally entrusting oneself to God the promiser, to the truth of whose word the Spirit testifies. Mission is no longer *in its root sense* a matter of being sent to make others aware that they are the heirs of God's promise. It is, instead, doing good things for the suffering, which itself is a laudable thing that we should, no doubt, do more of. And within the churches, words like gospel and mission are used as warrants for whatever a group of undoubtedly sincere persons believes should be the church's agenda. An agenda that then makes the church a pressure group pushing its program on the body politic.

Another Vision:

Liturgy as a Zone of Experience of Our Place within the Promise

It is no accident that the Apostle Paul uses *mysterion* ("mystery") in ways that are consonant with Hellenistic mystery cult usages, subverting them so that Jesus becomes the heir to the promises of the Hebrew Testament and the revelation of their paradoxical fulfillment in the now and not yet soteriology of the Christian Testament. Growing up in Tarsus, Paul absorbed the language of such cults. In later Deutero-Pauline letters like Ephesians and Colossians, the use of the term *mysterion* subverts the Hellenistic mystery cults completely, so much so that in Ephesians 1: 9-10, the figure of Jesus as the Christ is the key to the entire fate of the universe and the cipher that reveals the good will of God toward creation. Scholars as different as Bruce Chilton (2004) and N. T. Wright (2005) recognize the depths of his understanding of Hellenistic culture, while pointing out how profoundly Paul uses this linguistic terminology to bring Jewish concepts to the Hellenistic world. In today's language, Paul is the first great inculturationist.

This sense of liturgical celebration of the paschal mystery, I believe, is indispensable to adequate initial and ongoing formation of Christians, all of whom are called to be missionaries, whether we work abroad or cross-culturally or at home among members of our own culture.

Before going further, though, let me say that I realize I must tread carefully. Lutherans and Catholics have been arguing about things like the nature of the ordained ministry, sacraments, and especially the relationship of Word and Sacrament for nearly five centuries. Oceans of ink have been spilled analyzing how one can split hairs about what is the "real presence" of Christ

in the Eucharist and the Eucharistic assembly. I realize that for Protestants, belief that the Roman Catholic way of centrally organizing global church life and teaching that God has endowed episcopal and papal leaders with the authority to declare what has been revealed and must be believed is a usurpation of an authority that belongs to the Scriptures and the Holy Spirit alone. Catholic liturgical life is viewed with equal suspicion for reasons I appreciate.

Arguments about such things need to be had on another day. I am trying here to make a narrower case. Namely, the case (1) that worship ought to be one of the key elements in congregational life – the principal zone of formation and transformation; and (2) that liturgy should center on a celebration of the paschal mysteries of our salvation as revelation of God's promises, purposes, and means of acting in the world. We should be conservative in how we celebrate, lest in a desire to introduce things that will enliven the celebration we veil the centrality of Christ and the Spirit. Concretely, I want to suggest that making up worship as we go along is dangerous. What do I mean? For example, tailoring a wedding to the level of belief the young couple has for the gospel, making up vows that reflect sentimental love but very little the reality that marriage is God's school for men and women to learn discipleship. Making a funeral a place for eulogizing the departed one, forgetting that it is the place where a community joins itself to the great cloud of witnesses past and present and celebrates the passage of a loved one from life to life, helping that community renew its hope in the promise being fulfilled in each member. Making Sunday morning worship a spectacle of sound and light on 60-inch flat screen panels, complete with Moses parting the Red Sea. Making seminary chapel exercises a demonstration project for students' creativity rather than a place to learn how to function as a leader in a community whose living center is

Christ, whom the Holy Spirit makes present in a special manner during the Eucharist.

Yes, traditional Catholic (or Lutheran or Reformed or Orthodox) orders of worship can be boring, but the problem of boredom at worship is really something about which my friend, the SVD liturgist Thomas Krosnicki, has said, "The problem of sterile Sunday worship is a problem of not doing anything during the week that raises one's consciousness ... not reading the scriptures, joining in deeper conversation with one's fellow Christians , not spending time in family in the morning, at noon, and at night, praying and harmonizing one's life with the Lord." Such things one brings to liturgy and joins with Jesus in the renewal of his paschal mystery.

At risk of making a sweeping generalization, let me suggest that the single greatest weakness in Western Christianity since the early 19th century is equating religion with ethics and then making Sunday worship a time for instructing people on how to behave if one wishes to be faithful to Christ. We have moved this direction, I believe, because Kant's critiques have made us recognize the limitations of human knowledge. We are wary of trying to talk about such things as eternal life, our place within the "grain of the universe" (see Hauerwas 2001), and God's promises, because the "cultured despisers" of Christianity know such doctrines are untenable in a scientific age. Saying that what we are about in worship is celebrating the paschal mystery and giving thanks that we are part of it, well, it just seems too fanciful. Embarrassed by such metanarrative-based doctrines on the shape of creation and our hopes for its completion in God in a way foreshadowed in the resurrection, we retreat to what is safe – offering practical moral guidance rooted in the New Testament.

The most important criterion for genuine liturgy is not just how

much or how little pomp is involved but whether it brings the worshiper to participate in the mysteries that are enshrined in God's promises realized in Jesus. As far as the origins of complex worship ceremonies are concerned, the liturgical scholar Paul Bradshaw reminds anyone who wants to reconstruct the liturgy of the early church for today that almost every generalization is wrong (see Bradshaw, 2002 and 2004). Liturgies varied immensely in the first several centuries. They were different in Persia, Nubia, Ephesus, Mediterranean Gaul, or Rome and Ravenna. There is as much evidence, according to Bradshaw, for early liturgies that were complex as there is for later ones that were simple and vice versa. What is clear is that by the first half of the fourth century, the rites of worship were celebrated as various ways of participating in the paschal mystery in communion with one's fellow Christians.

Rodney Stark (1996 and 2006) shows, conclusively I think, that it was the integrity of the new Christian communities and their steadfastness in love and service to one another in practical ways – caring for the victims of pestilence and burying the dead, for example – that turned the tide of pagan public opinion in favor of the Christians in the Roman Empire. Yes, such habits of service and love gave credibility to the missionary efforts of the new movement. And it is common for missiologists to say that if the church is to have similar success in our age, it needs to implement analogous programs of social welfare and to aid in the liberation of people in Latin America, Africa, and inner city United States. Agreeing that we should do all these things, I draw another conclusion about how the early church became what it was.

The lives of this cloud of witnesses in the early centuries were formed primarily within a liturgical context of celebrating the mysteries of Christ. Scripture was interpreted in the light of liturgical celebration, not principally in a scholar's study.

David Power believes this balance should be restored (see Power 2001, 47ff., 131ff.). Lives transformed in settings of community worship overflowed the boundaries of the liturgical assembly and did the sort of actions that Stark shows gave Christianity credibility in the first centuries.

My Question: In our own day, does renewal of mission need to return to celebrating the paschal mystery in ways that enable men and women to bring their entire lives to the liturgical act and participate in the paschal mystery of Christ who comes to meet them? In such celebration God takes over the schooling of the inner person, making that person fit to be God's witness, putting on a "new self created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness" (Ephesians 4:24).

Celebration of the paschal mystery in early Christianity was an acknowledgment that the supremely most important events in history are those that surround the life, death and resurrection of Christ, the pattern of whose life is a revelation of the grain of the universe.

Christian ethics and missiology are based in the reality that, if we allow ourselves to be conformed to Christ, the Spirit will move us away from anomia and hamartia (Rom 8: 29; 12: 1- 2; Eph 3: 16-19) and we will experience the forgiveness of sin that leads us to gratitude to God for the fullness of life.

Only with some sort of renewal on these lines will our churches become zones of celebration that nurture the Christian missionary life in its fullness. Most followers of Christ will go into mission as husbands and wives, missionaries in their families and local communities. Some will venture into foreign lands as evangelists and diggers of wells. But if we are to avoid the subjectivism and consumerism of contemporary life, the church must find ways to make their life worship in the spirit

and truth of the paschal mystery.

Concluding Remarks

I began our time together reading a passage from Philippians in which Paul prayed for the community at Philippi. It is a prayer that is repeated in other words in Ephesians 3: 14-20:

For this reason I kneel before the Father, from whom his whole family in heaven and on earth derives its name. I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God. Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever! Amen.

It is this vision that rescues us from the *anomia* of living out of synch with the great symphony that is the universe struggling to become what it is meant to be. It is not a set of ideas or concepts. Rather, it is the ability to hear the deepest chords of the symphony of the universe. God's forgiveness is not giving us a pass if we run a red light, it is the offering of a relationship that gives us new eyes to escape sin as *hamartia*, blindness to the path of becoming who we are meant to be in God's plan for making the world right.

Most of all, it is a vision of *realizing* in our inmost being that God's reconciling Spirit has made us one with God and all

creation and then making that realization part of our way of living. *It is a way of participating really, not just conceptually, in fashioning a life that is one with the grain of the universe.* Participating in that mission transforms us, and it is that transformation that enables us to join in God's mission in whatever state of life we find ourselves.

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CROSSING John 12:20-33 & “I Am An African”

Crossings 3rd International Conference

Morning Prayer Tuesday, January 26th, 2010

Pr. David P. Schreiber

Resurrection Lutheran Church, Indianapolis, IN

20Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. 21They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, “Sir, we wish to see Jesus.” 22Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and

told Jesus. 23Jesus answered them, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. 24Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. 25Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. 26Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor.

27Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say – 'Father, save me from this hour'? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. 28Father, glorify your name." Then a voice came from heaven, "I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again." 29The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, "An angel has spoken to him." 30Jesus answered, "This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. 31Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. 32And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." 33He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die.

Last week at our staff calendar meeting, I informed our secretary that I would be missing today's meeting, as I would be here, attending, as I said with a rather self-important air of worldly sophistication, "The 3rd *International Conference* of the Crossings Community." "Really!" she said, duly impressed...until I told her I was driving to St. Louis. I felt a little like Dan Erlander, who when introduced at Holden Village as an *international* speaker, admitted he had once given a few lectures in Canada...

All of us gather here this morning, however...*all* of us – whether from a couple of hours away or a couple of continents away – all of us gather here because *by definition*, any community that sees itself as gathering under the cross, by definition, is

international. What did Jesus tell those Greeks who came seeking to see him? (By the way, in earshot of Phillip and Andrew and all the other insiders?) He said to that “First” International Conference of the Crossings Community, that *lifted up* (and John underscores less we miss it, lifted up on the cross), he would indeed draw *all people* to himself. By definition, the cross community is international.

I don’t know about you, but that reminder diagnoses an all-too-easy *national* parochialism that defines, at least, me and my community on the southside of Indianapolis, the “heartland” of America, where a neighboring church hosts a wildly popular annual “God and Country Festival” on the weekend of the 4th of July, complete with – and I kid you not – a military fly-over as the climax of the outdoor worship service....

So, I come to the 3rd (or is it then the 4th?) *International* Conference of the Crossings Community, and I remember an early morning in Michigan City, early as well in my ministry, giving a tour of our school and church to a visiting evangelist from South Africa, who stopped dead in his tracks in the center aisle of St. Paul Lutheran Church, the coal-black color of his face almost draining away, as he pointed incredulously at the American flag in our chancel, and asked me why it was there, so close to the altar.... He could not understand this. Was not the Son of Man lifted up to draw all people to himself???

It was later, I think, that I came upon “*I Am An African*” written by South African poet Gabriel Setiloane. In this epic confessional poem, asked what an African believes, Setiloane first reaffirms the faith of his forefathers who knew God under different names, such as Uvelingqaki or Unkulunkulu. This leads to a further question:

“Tell us further, you African: what of Jesus, the Christ,

Born in Bethlehem: Son of Man and Son of God
Do you believe in him?"

And the answer in Setiloane's poem is:

"For ages He eluded us, this Jesus of Bethlehem, Son of Man;
Going first to Asia and to Europe, and the western sphere . . .
.

"Later on, He came, this Son of man;
Like a child delayed He came to us.
The White Man brought Him.
He was pale, and not the Sunburnt Son of the Desert.
As a child He came.

"A wee little babe wrapped in swaddling clothes.
Ah, if only He had been like little Moses,
lying Sun-scorched on the banks of the River of God
We would have recognized Him.
He eludes us still, this Jesus, Son of Man.
His words: Ah, they taste so good
as sweet and refreshing as the sap of the palm raised and
nourished on African soil,
The Truths of his words are for all men, for all time.

"And yet for us it is when He is on the cross,
This Jesus of Nazareth, with holed hands
and open side, like a beast at a sacrifice;
When He is stripped naked like us,
Browned and sweating water and blood in the heat of the sun,
Yet silent,
That we cannot resist Him.

"How like us He is, this Jesus of Nazareth,
Beaten, tortured, imprisoned, spat upon, truncheoned,
Denied by His own, and chased like a thief in the night,

Despised , and rejected like a dog that has fleas,
for NO REASON.

“No reason, but that He was Son of his Father,
OR . . . Was there a reason?
There was indeed . . .
As in that sheep or goat we offer in sacrifice,
Quiet and uncomplaining.
Its blood falling to the ground to cleanse it, as us:
And making peace between us and our fathers long passed away.
He is that LAMB!
His blood cleanses,
not only us,
not only the clan,
not only the tribe,
But all, all MANKIND:
Black and White and Brown and Red,
All Mankind!

“HO! . . . Jesus, Lord, Son of Man and Son of God,
Make peace with your blood and sweat and suffering,
With God, UVELINGQAKI, UNKULUNKULU,
For the sins of Mankind, our fathers and us,
That standing in the same Sonship with all mankind and you,
Together with you, we can pray to Him above:
FATHER FORGIVE.”

What is it about the cross, that makes it so hard to resist
being drawn to *this* Jesus, and I mean this Jesus, not the
powerful and glorious one I invoke to bless *my* country, defend
my church, sanction *my* life, ease *my* parochial concerns, but the
one who says my Indiana grain of wheat/corn must first die, for
fruit to be born, who bids me to hate my life in this world, who

confronts me with the hard truth that me and my world and my country are not “#1”, and as I continue to insist and live as if it were so, there is a death sentence in that which does not lead to any kind of lasting, abundant, let alone eternal life....

What is it about the cross, that makes it so hard to resist being drawn to *this* Jesus, this Jesus who invites me and people of every nation, tribe and culture to consider the transformational promise that the hour of his glory is when he looks like a loser, lifted high on a cross.....?

Setiloane and John would suggest it is because there, on the cross, where God appears “just like us.” It is there on the cross where God meets us where we are most profoundly human, both victims and perpetrators of sin, brokenness and death. The cultural diagnostic details of our particular problems may differ, but ultimately we are all nailed there, nailed there in God-forsaken pain and judgement....

But surprise...there, too, is God, *God*, looking “just like us.” God, saying, “I am an African.” God, in the rubble of Port-o-Prince saying, “I am a Haitian.” God, in the cross-hairs of the West Bank saying, “I am a Palestinian.” “I am an Israeli.” God, even in the uneasy and smug anxiety of the suburban heartland saying, “I am an American.”

And we cannot resist him, *this* Jesus, for he alone makes us one, and he alone takes our dead grains and makes of us a living loaf, a forgiven and free “Bread for the World”, a truly *International* Conference of the Crossings Community. INI

Oh, Praise the Gracious Power



1 Oh, praise the gra - cious pow'r that tum - bles walls of fear
2 Oh, praise per - sis - tent truth that o - pens fist - ed minds
3 Oh, praise in - clu - sive love, en - cir - cling ev - 'ry race,
4 Oh, praise the word of faith that claims us as God's own,
5 Oh, praise the tide of grace that laps at ev - 'ry shore



and gath - ers in one house of faith all strang - ers far and near:
and eas - es from their anx - ious clutch the prej - u - dice that blinds:
ob - liv - i - ous to gen - der, wealth, to so - cial rank or place:
a liv - ing tem - ple built on Christ, our rock and cor - ner - stone:
with vi - sions of a world at peace, no lon - ger bled by war:



We praise you, Christ! Your cross has made us one!

6 Oh, praise the pow'r, the truth,
the love, the word, the tide.
Yet more than these, oh, praise their source,
praise Christ the crucified: *Refrain*

7 Oh, praise the living Christ
with faith's bright songful voice!
Announce the gospel to the world
and with these words rejoice: *Refrain*

Text: Thomas H. Troeger, b. 1945
Music: CHRISTPRAISE RAY, Carol Duran, b. 1936
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[Schreiber_Morning_Prayer_Crossings_10 \(PDF\)](#)

"IT IS FINISHED!"

John 19:25b-30

Crossings Third International Conference

Crossing the Cross

Evening Prayer

Monday, January 25, 2010

Rev. Dr. Steven E. Albertin

"Crucifixion (Corpus Hypercubus)" by Salvador Dali

Several months ago the History Channel had a show on Roman crucifixion. It explained all the nitty gritty details of crucifixion, especially its brutality and its ability to put the human body through incredible levels of pain and suffering. The Romans also used it as a very effective tool of state sponsored psychological terrorism. Dare to challenge Roman rule . . . and you paid for it dearly.

One of the most vivid accounts of Roman crucifixion described what was done to the slave revolt led by Sparticus against the empire in 71 AD. After some initial success the revolt was brutally crushed. As a show of Roman power and a threat against anyone else to would dare to disobey, the empire crucified 6000 slaves along a 120 mile road leading into Rome. The bodies weren't even removed after the victims died. They were left to rot and be scavenged by animals . . . for all to see . . . and be terrified.

After viewing this program the crucifixion of Jesus seemed surreal. It is difficult to believe that anyone, let alone the very Son of God, had to endure such brutality and pain. As you read the accounts of Jesus' suffering in Matthew, Mark and Luke, the suffering and pain are clear. Jesus' cry of dereliction, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me," clearly reflects the anguish and pain of Roman crucifixion.

And then we come to the Gospel of John. His portrayal of Jesus' suffering is very different from the other Gospels. In John there are no cries of despair. Instead John presents Jesus on the cross as his finest "hour," his moment of "glory." Even his cry of thirst is not so much about a parched tongue or cracked lips . . . but the fulfillment of Scripture and the completion of God's plan to save the world.

Likewise, when Jesus cries, "It is finished," it is not so much the cry of someone who is finished, exhausted, depleted, wiped out and ready to collapse in pain. No, this is the cry of someone who has completed his task and knows it. It is more a cry of triumph with a sense of satisfaction than the cry of defeat drenched in despair.

That message, filled with paradox and irony, is portrayed here in this painting, as only the great Salvadore Dali could do it. Entitled "Crucifixion (Corpus Hypercubus)" it reflects Dali's deep Christian faith and his fascination with science and mathematics. Jesus is on the cross . . . but is he? He is fixed to the cross . . . but not fixed, almost seeming to levitate over the cross, projecting himself upward and outward. This is an act of defiance if not victory. Even the cross, this brutal tool of state sponsored terrorism cannot contain him.

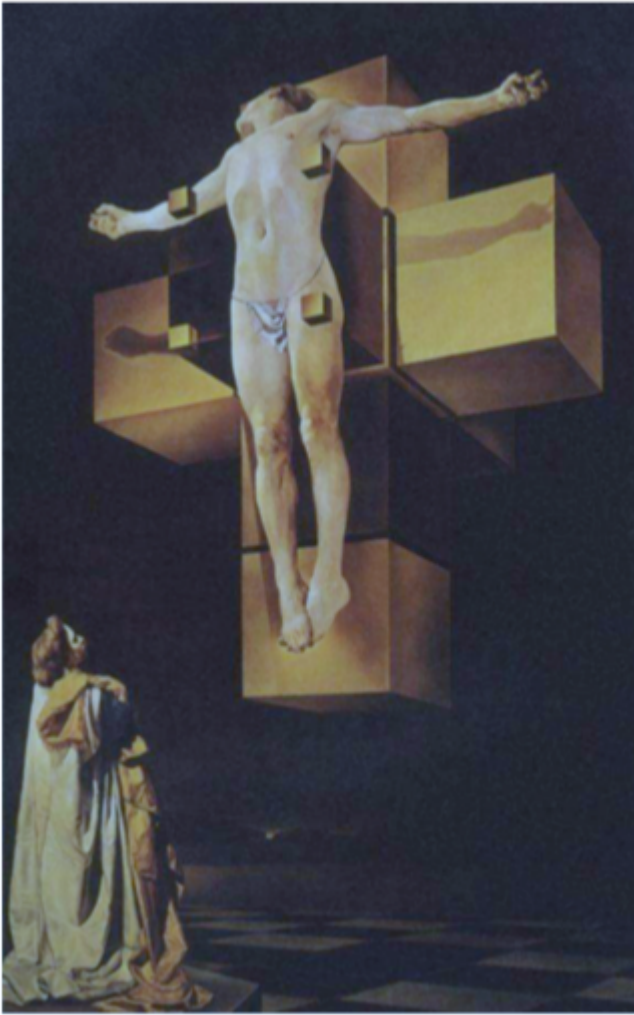
But notice the cross . . . its perfect cubism, its geometric symmetry, its clean efficiency. Dali knows that in our world of terrorism . . . sin and evil are often far too clever to force their brutality directly upon us. The forces of sin and evil in our modern and even post-modern worlds are expressed more subtlety in the cold efficiencies of mechanized, sanitized and technologically dehumanized systems that in their presumptuous messianism proclaim a gospel of lies, distortion and death.

But even in this kind of world, God's love cannot be thwarted. God so loved the world that He gave his only Son . . . to carry our sin, to suffer our plight, to endure our fate, and to bear His own judgment on this sin-sick world . . . and to suffer the consequences, . . . even death on a cross . . . for us and our salvation.

That is why that darkest of all days, that Friday long ago when the very Son of God was tortured and executed with brutal Roman

efficiency at the “place of the skull,” . . . is the best of all days. It is a good day. It is a good Friday, THE Good Friday, because . . . as Dali so vividly portrays . . . God’s love rises above the gravitational pull of all that would drag down and swallow up all that is good. God’s love on that blessed and holy cross . . . rises buoyantly, triumphantly. Christ, lifted up and crucified, the ultimate expression of Divine Love, . . . draws the whole universe into His loving arms.

Is not “Corpus Hypercubus” also a picture of the church’s mission? The church’s mission proclaims Christ’s promise to all who are stuck in the gravitational pull of sin, death, the power of the Evil One. The church’s mission offers to us and through us the world the promise that Jesus’ fate and destiny will be theirs. The church’s mission proclaims Christ who sets free all those who are chained to the deadly gravitational pull of human depravity, so that they can go begin the work of restoring creation . . . to the perfect cube of unbroken geometric symmetry (portrayed here so well by Dali) that God created the world to be. The church’s mission proclaims Christ’s promise so that all who believe can be lifted buoyantly above the crushing judgment of God to dare to go into the world to care for the broken and bleeding, redeem those in bondage . . . and deliver them into God’s loving arms . . . forever.



[It_Is_Finished_John_19_Eve_Prayer_1-25-10 \(PDF\)](#)

**“Come over to M.I.T.–and
Concordia–and help us.”**

Some thoughts on promissio and missio in academe, and a 21st-century promise-truster’s guide to avoiding a host of false dilemmas that lie between Athens and Jerusalem.

Frederick Niedner, Valparaiso University

Third International Crossings Conference

God's Promise, Our Mission: Making the Crucial Link 1

January 25-27, 2010, St. Louis, MO

1 Steve Kuhl's Exegesis of Conference Theme: In a sense, we are asking, "How does God's promise in Christ inform the nature of the church's and the Christian's mission in the world? What is it about the promise of God in Christ, if anything, that makes Christian mission to the world distinctive, if not unique?"

First, a note about my title, so as to explain it to myself as well as to you. Cathy Lessmann asked for a title last April, and according to the email record I traced, she said the planning committee wanted to hear me on the topic of "mission on the college campus." I wrote back that I would think about it during the lunch hour and get back to her. Later that afternoon, I sent the topic and brief description that appears in the program (above). It has an obvious allusion to a mission moment in the New Testament (Acts 16, and Paul's vision of the Macedonian man saying, "Come, help."). I chose to use that famous image of "opposite places" once offered by Tertullian and used over and over at my school, Athens and Jerusalem. Apparently I thought I could talk about both "secular" and church-related schools in the same talk, although I work in a context that sees itself as both Athens and Jerusalem. Finally, my descriptive gloss suggests I thought I could somehow show that the needs were essentially the same at M.I.T. and in Athens as they are at Concordia and Jerusalem.

Beyond that, I don't know what I thought I was going to say. (What were those false dilemmas I must have pondered while I jogged that noonday? Most likely false dilemmas such as creation

vs. evolution, but in truth, I no longer remember.) I do have some thoughts, however, about the state of Christianity in our colleges and universities, and about the *promissio*-inspired mission we might take up for ourselves in today's academe. I've been teaching and working with the 18-22 year-old slice of the demographic pie that comes to church-related colleges for almost two, full student generations. Much has changed, and much has stayed the same. The mission has always been to preach and teach the gospel and to live the promise, but the context has changed somewhat in 37 years.

I begin with a handful of observations and concerns:

- That sobering demographic projection about Lutherans that's around these days, the one that says ELCA will vanish due to simple attrition by 2046 and the LCMS a year or so later, suggests that there's a ripe "mission field" all around us, probably in our own families. If we're not going to continue having six children per Lutheran couple, then we could at least make sure the two we do have remain active with the church.
- I confess that I have failed at this parental mission. I have three children, one on his own, about to become a parent himself, one in college, and one finishing high school. None are active in the church, although the ones still listed as dependents on my tax forms are required, for example, to sing with my wife and me in the *ad hoc* Christmas Eve choir at the Valpo Chapel. My youngest, I'm told, has announced on his Facebook page that he's an agnostic. (I'm not terribly worried about this last child. As I recall, it took me a little longer to get there, but I, too, had an agnostic period. I, however, was afraid to tell anyone.)
- When I started teaching at Valpo, 1,000 students (out of nearly 4,000) attended regular Sunday Eucharist at 10:30

a.m. Today we average 100 to 115, including the choir, and most are community people, not students. About 150 students come on Sunday evenings to sing Holden Vespers, and, as has been the case for all my years at Valpo, about 200 attend a 10 p.m. "Celebrate" Eucharist on Wednesday evenings.

- In the '70's, daily morning chapel (in the post-required era) had 400 to 500 in attendance. Today we average 40 to 50. In other words, we could be the canary that indicates to the church bodies we're connected to that there is something in the air that isn't good for our future.
- That's not to say there's no piety, faith, or church on campus. Indeed, the Catholic Student Center remains a vital place of worship, though it's also become a local congregation, and the Evangelical groups (e.g., IVCF, FCA, and Campus Crusade) are very active and draw students from all denominations. My sense is that most people on campus, save a few who must be near- zealots about Catholicism or Lutheranism, have become garden-variety Evangelicals when it comes to their working theologies.
- I once saw my work, at least in part, as liberating young Lutherans from the bibliolatry they'd learned back home. No more. They may revere the Bible, but they don't know what's in it. The proof? They no longer get my jokes.
- In short, I work with a generation that doesn't gather for worship. Moreover, the utter casualness of those who do attend worship astonishes this old geezer. Even those students who lead our weekday morning services do so in ripped jeans and shirts (usually T-shirts) that look slept in. Their opening greeting is, "Hey, guys. Welcome to Morning Prayer." We make the marketplace's "business casual" look like formal attire, especially on Fridays when the students choose their own music. It's some version or another of "O Jesus, you're so fine, you're so

fine you blow my mind. . .Hey, Jesus!"

- While their peers sip coffee, tea, and bottled water in the pews, student homilists exhort one another to be nice, work for justice, and try to save the planet. Most of the adult homilists comfort those assembled with assurances that God loves you and judgment isn't so bad as you think or fear. (E.g., in Advent, we were told that John the Baptist didn't really mean to sound so harsh as he seems to in our lessons.)
- Organists and choirs prepare rigorously. They strive for excellence. As for nearly everyone else, nothing need be taken all that seriously. Structure, formality, and excellence are suspect. A generation raised on "reality TV" and cyber-social networking twitters its time and life away by pretending, or maybe even believing, that my imminent plan to take a shower or make some macaroni and cheese, intentions I broadcast to the world, have the same gravity as getting divorced or even dying. The message is mixed: "Everything has meaning great enough to announce to the world, but nothing really matters."
- I spent part of this past week teaching Rousseau's Social Contract to students in our first-year Core course. They found him impenetrable and suspected he might be a communist. But they did perk up when we got to Book IV, the part on Civil Religion, where Rousseau talks about how religious difference and disagreement bring on the dissolution of a society. This my students could agree on:

It is impossible to live in peace with those one believes to be damned. To love them would be to hate God who punishes them. It is absolutely necessary either to reclaim them or torment them. Whenever theological intolerance is allowed, it is impossible for it not to have some civil effect; and once it does, the sovereign is no longer sovereign, not even over temporal affairs. Thenceforward, priests are the true masters;

kings are simply their officers.

Now that there no longer is and never again can be an exclusive national religion, tolerance should be shown to all those that tolerate others, so long as their dogmas contain nothing contrary to the duties of a citizen. But whoever dares to say *outside the church there is no salvation* ought to be expelled from the state, unless the state is the church and the prince is the pontiff. Such a dogma is good only in a theocratic government; in all other forms of government it is ruinous. (Book IV, Chap X)

Without engaging all the necessary contextual issues involved in agreeing or disagreeing with Rousseau, I could also assent to this statement on the basis of my own thinking about what it means to be 'saved' and who is or isn't in that category. But for my students and my children, this position is an orthodoxy they've been taught all through their schooling. At the heart of multiculturalism and globalism lies this kind of thinking in its naked, political form. And, it leads young people toward the notion that matters of faith and religious conviction are OK as long as they don't mean much.

- This fall, in a currently required course called "The Christian Tradition," I required students to read and critique one of a number of books by today's 'pop culture religion and theology' writers. Fully half the class read and wrote about *The Shack*. Most loved this book. Their reason: The book depicts God as easy-going and against hierarchy, and it seems God really means to save everyone—and that saving has little to do with the cross.

I'm probably wrong about a lot of things, and certainly wrong about a few, but this is some of how I see the context of *missio* in today's academe. How does one go about the mission of promise-telling and promise-keeping in this context? I have one

point of *promissio* with which I must remind myself, and you, too, perhaps. And I have one point of possible strategy.

PROMISSIO

In response to all of this kind of talk today, there is lots of current buzz about “the emerging church.” This is supposedly a new kind of church and perhaps a new sort of mission Christians can be on, especially the young, the casual, and the disaffected. The most popular depictions paint the emerging church as a transformer of society, a group that will follow Jesus’ teachings and get folks to work for social justice and help save the environment from careless consumption. They gather in garages, storefronts, and malls, dress in jeans and t-shirts, and open their ‘liturgies’ with a greeting such as, “Hey, guys. Welcome to New Vision.” The spread of this emerging church, like the burgeoning Pentecostalism in Africa, is supposed to give us hope.

The back cover of the latest Christian Century advertises a June 2010 Washington Island Forum titled “Almost Christian: What the Faith of our Teenagers Is Telling the American Church.” Session titles include: “Somebody Save Me: Youth and the Quest for a Passionate Church.” “Youth and the Church of ‘Benign Whatever-ism’: Going Viral for Jesus.” “Recovering a Missional Imagination: Why Generation OMG Is the Theological Stimulus Package We Need.” I sense that the key ingredient of all this is passion. (The advertised forum leader has a book out called “Practicing Passion,” but passion about what? I wonder if anyone connected to all this remembers that “passion” is first of all a word for suffering.)

My hope for the church is also, and only, in the emerging church, but the way I see it, that’s the only kind of church there has ever been, a church that emerges. . .daily. . .from

the font and from the tomb. Daily dying and rising—that's the only "life" the church has ever had, even in whatever era we might think of as its 'glory days.'

In the one, holy, catholic, apostolic, and emerging church, each of us singly and all of us together, are Lazarus, that character in John 11. If I ever get to help start a mission church, I promise I'll do all in my power to name the congregation "Lazarus-R Us." That's who we are. Jesus calls us from the tomb, stinking dead, and hands us over to a community that will strip off our grave-clothes, the first costume we don in a baptismal rite, and by means of things like forgiveness (cf. the verbs at the end of John 11, "Unbind him, let him go;" those are forgiveness verbs elsewhere in John), that community will teach and train us in a new way of "walking" (*halakah*, those in Jesus' day would have called it) and send us on our mission. And what is the mission? In John 11, Jesus calls Lazarus from an old life into the life abundant (John 10:10), the life that Jesus himself lives, the life that finds its mission on the road to Jerusalem which he's already on when he stops in Bethany to call out Lazarus.

And, you will recall, Jesus got Lazarus into big trouble. With Lazarus on the loose, Jesus' enemies plotted now against the newly raised guy as well. How odd. Jesus calls Lazarus from a grave only to get him killed again shortly thereafter. It's as though when Jesus called out Lazarus, he said, "Lazarus, dear friend, come out of there. Anybody can die of AIDS or H1N1 or cancer or a heart attack. Let's go up to Jerusalem and die a real death, a Big-D Death! Let's give our lives away!" The same call comes to us. Ordinary, little-d death will get us one way or another, but we'll have cheated—better, the Spirit will have cheated—that death out of its power with our gospel, and with living the abundant life by dying a Big-D death—his death, Christ's death.

I believe this about the whole church, not just individuals. The various church bodies—and they are bodies, flesh-and-blood frail bodies—to which we belong are dying little-d deaths. How can we give our lives away, offering them in Big-D deaths that bear witness, that proclaim the promise that will call the dead from the tomb?

SUGGESTION

I read a wonderful book in December and went to a conference to discuss it earlier this month. It's Thomas Long's *Accompany Them with Singing: The Christian Funeral* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2009). Get it. Read, mark, learn, and think about it. In this book, Long diagnoses plenty of the ills that have befallen the church's funeral practices in an era that's seen death and dying made captive of the culture, including its funeral directors, the trivializing, anti-ritual instincts to which I referred earlier among my students, and the rampant Gnosticism that's everywhere about us. Long's 'fix' is a new attention to the whole of Christian theology that leads us to take death and life, our bodies as well as our souls, our baptisms as well as our everyday discipleship, and most especially the discipleship manifest in singing, seriously.

I can't recommend this book enough. Let's discuss it at a Crossings Conference if we can. Sooner rather than later.

If I were pastoring a parish, I'd try to work parish renewal around this book. We'd read the book together somehow or another. But mostly, we'd begin again to make funerals among the most central and important ministry we engage in, right up there with confirmation, adult education, and stewardship. Because here is where everything it means to be a Christian comes together.

Here is where the promise of baptism matters, and gets fulfilled. Here is where we get to preach the gospel, not merely do a little therapy that might momentarily comfort the grieving. It is after all gospel, not therapy, that truly comforts! And it's drama. It provides plot for our lives. It declares that things do matter. There is a pattern. The Christian life has a trajectory, a promise-given trajectory. We go down to the dust just like the grasshoppers and chickens, despite our fancy intellectual and imaginative equipment, as Ernest Becker reminded us a generation ago. But, we do not go down unaccompanied. The crucified Christ has come with us under the same condemnation. He accompanies us with singing: "My God, my God, why. . .?" "Into your hands I commit my Spirit, O God, thou faithful God." Those were his songs—the songs of his people, the ones he learned from childhood.

His body, the raised ones whom you see around you, accompany you all through your life, and you them. And no one goes alone through the birth canal into the waiting arms beyond the exit from knowing time as we know it now. Rather we go accompanied with singing.

I would fashion in a congregation a cast of funeral players. Singers, acolytes, crucifers, lectors, even preachers, and, of course, the Martha types that have always brought food...a holy group of players who would stay rehearsed. For that's what we do as Christians, we rehearse all our lives for the moment when our baptism is complete, or when some loved one's is complete. And our cast of funeral players would require plenty of youth. We'd get them excused from school on the days they "worked" a funeral gig with the rest of us.

My community learned this in July after a colleague died suddenly. Many of you read about it in a homily Ed Schroeder sent out as a Thursday Theology piece. I learned the mystery of

preparation and the salutary power of singing the faith in the days and hours leading up to my father's dying. I'd practiced all my life for the time when I would accompany him with singing, though I didn't know until then that that's what I'd rehearsed for. I do now.

So, now I've told my children they must have songs ready. And, I must find a way to teach my students the same thing. I must lead them through rehearsal of the story, the promise-laden story, so they're ready for my death, and for their own. But first, I must get with them about dying, which is serious business, not trivial and casual.

MISSION

I changed the subject, even on myself, with those last thoughts. I started out thinking, writing, and talking about how we might evangelize the generation of my students, and my Evangelical colleagues, too, perhaps. But the thing it will take to do that, really, is to have them sent, or even better, to go with them, on their own promise-initiated mission. I suggested that we make them a cast of funerary dramatists. In the larger scheme of things, and with a more biblical image, we must join our students and colleagues on the mission Jesus sent his friend Peter on when he listened to Peter's confession of faith at Caesarea Philippi and then said, "Great foundation, Rocky. Now, go straight to hell. They can't keep you out. Yes, the gates of Hades can't stand up to your assault."

Like many, I once thought hell would try to storm us, but we were safe in our hiding place. Wrong. We are the storm-troopers, the invaders. We constantly assault the gates of hell. Hell doesn't have a chance.

And this is our mission, the one on which our students go with

us—the invasion of hell. Into the breach of alienation and isolation we go. Into all the places where God and Christ are not, there the body of Christ steps in, like the Christ himself invaded hell, and voila! Hell is unhelled.

And maybe it all begins by practicing and rehearsing funerals. . . . accompanying with singing those who enter the birth canal toward that new place where our lives are hid with Christ in God.

To learn this, and to rehearse it adequately, we'll need to learn to take things seriously, like death, and judgment, and the pitiful stench of our self-righteousness. But we can look on these things squarely and, though trembling, unafraid. For we live and die clinging to the promise of the crucified one, or better, held in the arms of the crucified one's body, the body with arms, and songs, right here, right now.

I have two images of this mission, our assault on hell, that might help us recognize when we're in the midst of a critical moment of that assault, and what our resources are.

One comes from a book that tells the story of a young, Dutch, Jewish woman named Etty Hillesum, who spent the last two years of her life, 1942 and 1943, first at Westerbork, a Nazi transit camp in the Netherlands, and finally in Auschwitz. Her memoirs, entitled *An Interrupted Life* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1983), tell of a young woman's struggle to cope with life and love and sex and parents, and ultimately with the horrors of the story that goes by the name "Holocaust." In the face of radical evil Etty Hillesum clung to her faith, to her spirit, to her heart, to her God. Late one night, near the end of her days in the transit camp, she wrote in a diary she kept (and which remarkably, got saved):

I shall no longer write in this exercise book, I shall simply

lie down and try to be a prayer. . . .I know perfectly well I am not much good to anyone as I am now. I would so love to be just a little bit better again. But I ought not to make any demands. I must let things take their course and that's what I am trying to do with all my might. 'Not my will, but Thy will be done.'

There is no hidden poet in me, just a little piece of God that might grow into poetry.

And a camp needs a poet, one who experiences life there, even there, as a bard and is able to sing about it.

At night, as I lay in the camp on my plank bed, surrounded by women and girls gently snoring, dreaming aloud, quietly sobbing and turning, women and girls who often told me during the day, 'We don't want to think, we don't want to feel, otherwise we are sure to go out of our minds,' I was sometimes filled with an infinite tenderness, and lay awake for hours letting all the many, too many impressions of a much too long day wash over me, and I prayed, 'Let me be the thinking heart of these barracks,' And that is what I want to be again. The thinking heart of a whole concentration camp. I lie here so patiently and now so calmly again, that I feel quite a bit better already. (pp. 190-191)

One could use this set of images, and I have, to flesh out a whole theology of preaching and evangelizing, but I'll say here only that recognizing our place in some camp full of broken, isolated people who have no words of their own any longer, nor any way to name their God-forsakenness, is the first step. And we who cling to genuine *promissio* can be honest and name truly our sin, our brokenness, our God-forsakenness. We can take it seriously, look at it directly, because we know we have the *promissio*. And the promise is precisely this, that right here,

right there, in every place of God- forsakenness, *he* meets us. The crucified one. There is no place we can ever end up, but that even there, he is Lord for us. There, in hell, in the tomb four days and stinking, he shouts to us, "Heads up, I'm coming in!" And he swaps stories with us. We get his, he gets ours. We step into the blinding light. The community embraces us, then unbinds us and assists us in learning to walk.

I have a closing image, a more playful one, about the life of assaulting hell, or better perhaps, dispatching the guards who would keep us from letting anyone go. It's Wendell Barry's poem, "Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front" (*Collected Poems*, Northpoint Press, 1998, pp. 151- 152):

Love the quick profit, the annual raise,
vacation with pay. Want more
of everything ready-made. Be afraid
to know your neighbors and to die.
And you will have a window in your head.
Not even your future will be a mystery
any more. Your mind will be punched in a card
and shut away in a little drawer.
When they want you to buy something
they will call you. When they want you
to die for profit they will let you know.

So, friends, every day do something
that won't compute. Love the Lord.
Love the world. Work for nothing.
Take all that you have and be poor.
Love someone who does not deserve it.
Denounce the government and embrace
the flag. Hope to live in that free
republic for which it stands.
Give your approval to all you cannot understand.

Praise ignorance, for what man has not encountered
he has not destroyed.

Ask the questions that have no answers.
Invest in the millennium. Plant sequoias.
Say that your main crop is the forest
that you did not plant,
that you will not live to harvest.
Say that the leaves are harvested
when they have rotted into the mold.
Call that profit. Prophecy such returns.
Put your faith in the two inches of humus
that will build under the trees
every thousand years.
Listen to carrion – put your ear
close, and hear the faint chattering
of the songs that are to come.
Expect the end of the world. Laugh.
Laughter is immeasurable. Be joyful
though you have considered all the facts.
So long as women do not go cheap
for power, please women more than men.
Ask yourself: Will this satisfy
a woman satisfied to bear a child?
Will this disturb the sleep
of a woman near to giving birth?

Go with your love to the fields.
Lie down in the shade. Rest your head
in her lap. Swear allegiance
to what is nighest your thoughts.
As soon as the generals and the politicians
can predict the motions of your mind,
lose it. Leave it as a sign
to mark the false trail, the way

you didn't go. Be like the fox
who makes more tracks than necessary,
some in the wrong direction.
Practice resurrection.

The details in this poem may not be your way or mine, precisely,
to practice resurrection. But **speaking** the truth (both kinds of
truth, diagnosis and prognosis, in places of God-forsakenness),
while all our lives **hearing and believing** the voice that calls
us from inside the tomb, and walking the Lazarus walk—that's how
to do "*promissio*-inspired mission," whether in Athens or
Jerusalem.

[Mission_in_Academe_Niedner \(PDF\)](#)

"Let's Roll!" The Mission of Christ the Insurgent, A.D. 2010

Jerome Burce, D.Min.,
addressing the Third International Crossings Conference
Belleville, Illinois
25 January 2010

+ In Nomine Jesu +

There are two main things I want to do in this hour. First, I
want to take up a challenge that Ed Schroeder threw down in a

paper delivered last year at a conference of the Lutheran World Federation. The challenge is to find a fresh way of talking about mission that uses down-to-earth English and also does justice to the fullness of what God is up to in the world in A.D. 2010.1 I have a proposal along these lines for all of you to look at and to chew over, bearing in mind that what I'll present requires much fuller development than sixty minutes will permit.

My second aim is to invite the Holy Spirit to shove some steel up the spines of the missionaries who are here in this room, right now. When it comes to one of our roles as missionaries, too many of us have spines like wet noodles—and I aim that critique at myself first and foremost. By the way, if anybody thinks the word “missionary” doesn't mean you, you're in for a surprise. That much I can promise you.

So again, the main things: a) fresh language for mission; b) a push in the back for missionaries: but before I get to them I'm going to do some pre-ambling for 15 minutes or so, amble as in stroll here or there, poke your nose into this or that. Bear with me, please. Most all of it will prove, I think, to be relevant. And if it's not only relevant but also useful, then God be praised.

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Preambling: I start as I must with a word of thanks to the organizing committee for the astonishing privilege of standing before you this afternoon. The astonishment arises from the observation that I am not the scholar you might expect to be hearing from in this kind of time slot at this kind of conference. Instead I'm a pastor, chiefly that; one who tries to think about what he's doing even as he serves a busy congregation filled with saints who are pretty sure they don't

pay their pastors to sit around reading books. Thank God they don't object to their pastors taking time to write sermons, because for me that's where the bulk of the thinking gets done these days, and out of it emerges somebody whom others are willing to put before you as a practical theologian with something to say, perhaps..

Theologian: that's a person who plugs away day after day at two big jobs, this according to Crossings co-founder Robert W. Bertram in a paper he wrote almost 40 years ago.² Job 1 is to figure out whether and how the word of God spoken to people two and three thousand years ago continues to be the word of God for people today. Job 2, by far the greater job, is to keep pressing the one and only question that is absolutely essential to anything that can properly be called the mission of the Church *per se*. That question is simply this: why the cross? What *need* is there, today, for the crucified Christ who hangs at the center of everything the Church is about or is supposed to be about? And if the need is there, what can you as theologian do to help people recognize that need? Or more to the point, what contribution can you make, as theologian, to the Holy Spirit's crucial mission of getting people to hang their hearts on this crucified Christ the way some shepherds hung their hearts on the mangled Christ so long ago, and presto, there they were, the first-ever Christian missionaries, rousing a ruckus in the streets of Bethlehem as they glorified and praised God for the *promise* that they heard and seen (Lk. 2:20)?

Speaking of promise: that long ago paper of Bertram's ends with the line that gave rise to the title of this conference. "God's promise, our mission." Or as Bertram puts it, *promissio* is the secret of *missio*. That, of course, is the way academic theologians talk to each other, they're expected to. The kind of theologian I am isn't allowed to talk that way. In fact a big piece of my daily work is to turn the wonderful thoughts of

people like Bertram into the kind of language that ordinary people speak. I thank God every day that I got my start in the early '80s teaching theology in New Guinea Pidgin English. It's a down-to-earth language if ever there was one. It forces you as teacher to cut through the obfuscating verbiage that allowed you to slide through seminary sounding bright but not knowing much, and in doing so to find out at last what the wise ones you read and listened to were actually talking about. And then, when you return to your native English, you start to notice how the Church's language, especially in English, is loaded with opaque words— no, not high-falutin' words but down and dirty words, words, that is, that everybody tosses around though without quite grasping what they're all about. I think of them as "walnut words." They've been around, most of them, for as long as the church has spoken English, and over time and much use they've developed thick shells, shells that are hard to crack through, and even when you do the meat doesn't fall out very easily. You have to pick around in them with care so you don't make a hash of the meaning you're trying to extract. Still, the words are handy. And they're unavoidable. You can't sing a hymn or sit through a lection without breaking your teeth on them. So we take to tossing them around as a matter of course, without much thought, and it's the shell, not the contents, that people react to. If the shell is pretty and shiny they'll use it. If it's gnarly and moldy, they won't. It's how I *feel* about the word that matters, not whether, when it comes to the word, there's any "is" to the "is," as Bill Clinton might say.

Walnut words: sin, grace, faith—justification, God help us. I have long been convinced that a pervasive failure to penetrate such words, to think into them and through them, is responsible for all manner of nonsense that afflicts the church these days and plays havoc with its mission.

The church's mission, the thing of things that it's sent and

meant by God to do: when Bob Bertram talks about mission in his paper he does so in a way that is bound in 2010 to provoke snorts of derision, certainly in the secular world; in Muslim, Hindu, and Jewish worlds too; but also in corners of the Christian world. This shouldn't surprise us. To know Bertram was to know a confessing Lutheran, and all the more a classic, apostolic Christian. As such he identifies the Church's central, compelling mission as the proclamation of Christ Crucified—this Christ, nothing less; this Christ proclaimed as a necessary promise, a promise that must be out there, front and center, for people to hear if there's to be a future with God for any of us. Joel Osteen, for one, doesn't buy that. Nor, I fear, do the folks who organize big-scale mission festivals—Global Mission Events, they call them—for the Lutheran church body I belong to. Osteen, in case you don't know him, is the latest and most dazzling champion of the so-called prosperity gospel that has long stained the fabric of American Christianity. Its mission—I say this by the way; I find it fascinating—is strikingly similar to the one that drove the old millennial movements, often referred to as cargo cults, in Papua New Guinea and other parts of Melanesia, the question being how do you shake the chains in such a way that the goodies will start pouring down from God on high or from ancestors across the seas, as the case may be, so that when the goodies do pour in you can enjoy, yes, Your Best Life Now. (That's the title of Osteen's big book, the one that turned him into a millionaire if he wasn't one already.) Over at the GME, meanwhile, the question is no, not how do you shake God down, but rather, how do you shake down the saints? Or more politely, how do you inspire a contingent of earnest, well-meaning American Lutherans to cut loose with their goodies in support of this, that, or the other worthy project—the digging of a well; the launching, say, of a weaving project—that will help some desperate faraway folks to start enjoying *their* best life now. Notice how in both venues,

Osteen's and the GME's, the surface problem, Level One in the standard Crossings diagnostic, is a lack of stuff, be it my lack or somebody else's. For Osteen the underlying gut-level problem is a failure to trust that God is aching, just aching, to cut loose with the stuff. At the GME it's a lack of commitment to the principles of peace and justice that would drive folks like us to fork the stuff over. Of course if these are the issues—the only issues—then you don't need a Jesus to fix them, and you sure don't need that Jesus as we find him one ugly afternoon dripping blood from the spikes that some uniformed goon was obliged to pound through his wrists and his ankles. Why trouble people with an image that gross, especially when they're sensitive and caring people who *want* to please God? That being so let's spatter them, not with the blood of the Lamb— that's so last century Billy Graham—but with Bible verses and happy anecdotes, or with grave instruction in root causes. Let's challenge them to increase their faith so that the floodgates will open and the blessings start to flow. Let's call on them to live their best lives now as mini-saviors of the world, wise and caring people who will bless the poor and empower the dispossessed and leave behind a teeny-weeny carbon footprint so that 100 years from now the great-grandkids can breathe. *Sure* they can do it, if only they try.

Do I exaggerate? A little bit, perhaps. Even so, Kyrie eleison.

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Again, walnut words. I used to think the word to work on first with confused and shallow Christians was the word "sin." I'm changing my mind about that, for reasons I don't have time to explore right now. In any case, I'm suggesting here that the better word to start with is the word "mission."

Mission. That too is a walnut word, though not nearly so old as

the others. It appears nowhere in the Bible, except in bad translations. Ed Schroeder writes that it shows up in Christian vocabulary only after the Reformation.³ I'll take his word on that.

Still, even in its shorter use "mission" has developed a thick tough shell. A pretty and pleasing shell, I should add. This shapes its use at the popular level I operate at, where any and every church-sponsored adventure is labeled a mission trip. That would include a week with the teenagers in Disney World so long as they spend at least two hours while there picking up trash.

There is thickness at the scholarly level too, the one where people prefer to say *missio*, or these days, *missio dei*, the mission of God. Where did this term come from? According to Christopher J. H. Wright, an Anglican missiologist, it was coined by a German missiologist named Karl Hartenstein as a way of summarizing ideas he picked up from— who else—Karl Barth.⁴ Hartenstein introduced it in a summary report about the world mission conference that was held in Willingen, Germany in 1952. Along came another German, Georg Vicedom, a Neuendettelsau Lutheran who pioneered missionary work on my natal turf, the highlands of Papua New Guinea. Vicedom published a book in 1960 entitled *Missio Dei: Einfuehrung in eine Theologie der Mission*, in English "an introduction to a theology of mission"; whereupon, for whatever reason, the term took hold. Today *missio dei* controls the conversation at missiological meetings across the church's spectrum, though what one takes it to mean will depend, of course, on one's theological orientation. For some it describes and reinforces the Church's traditional evangelistic enterprise, bringing Christ to the nations as some Lutherans still say. For others it illuminates any and all work that God is doing to bless and benefit the world whether Christian preachers are involved or not. In some interpretations it renders Christian preaching pointless. Ed Schroeder has been

complaining about that at mission conferences for the past 20 or 30 years, blessed be he for complaining.⁵ To not much avail, I fear. Ed complains like a Lutheran, you see, and in the wider Christian world the classic Lutheran quack is the sound of an odd duck.

That doesn't mean it's a wrong duck. Luther was no dummy.

Missio dei. The mission of God, singular. It's the singularity that constitutes the toughest shell around this particular nut. No one seems to get past it, or even thinks to. There is one God, therefore there's one big mission. There is a three-in-one God, therefore all three persons have their fingers in the one big mission pot. The question is, what's in the pot, and which-all of God's human creatures are involved with God in stirring the pot? Some say his believing Christian creatures. Others say his human creatures, period. With that, the argument is on.

A plague, says Luther, on both your houses.

This is the Luther who early in his career, beginning, I believe, in his argument with Johannes Eck at Heidelberg,⁶ observes that God is busy in the world with two big projects, one that pleases and delights him and the other that doesn't. The one project suits God's nature as the God who loves his human creatures and wants to enjoy them enjoying him, above all as they trust him and revel in his mercy. The other is dirty work that God has got to do lest his dirty human creatures run riot and ruin everything God has made. The one is God's proper work, *opus proprium* in Latin. It's God's grand rescue project, anchored in the crucified Christ. The other is God's alien work, alien to his true desires for us; still it must be done, God's *opus alienum*, directed at stubborn, willful creatures who flat out refuse to trust him.⁷

Here's my proposal: let's take this distinction and apply it

like a nutcracker to the word mission. It stands to reason that where there is *opus* there is *missio*, that is, God sends others to do his work, and in that work he entangles human agents. We here take this to be true of God's proper work, don't we? Lots of us are pastors. Every Sunday you'll find us at pulpits and at altars, why? Because God sent us there to preach and offer the benefits of Christ, yes?

So how about that other work, the alien kind? Well, let me illustrate. Some months ago my daughter got a parking ticket and failed to mail in the fine. I found out about this because the car was registered in my name, and I got the dunning letter. To learn more I went to the website of the Cleveland Municipal Court. Here's the statement I found myself staring at: "The mission of the Clerk of Courts is to record and process all matters decided in Cleveland Municipal Court. 'We Care.'" Love that last line. Translation, apropos to the situation I was in: "we care enough for your fellow citizens to keep scofflaws like you from dodging their obligations." Question: is it *only* the Clerk of Courts who cares that way? Is it only *their* mission to maintain order at the parking spaces on Cleveland streets? Answer: of course not. Not if I believe that God daily and richly provides folks with all they need to sustain this body and life," up to and including the law and order that enables the likes of you and me to find a downtown parking spot from time to time. Does the Clerk of Courts think that he or she is one of God's missionaries? I somehow doubt it. I'm pretty sure that had I said as much in a note of thanks included with my daughter's check—her check, not mine—he or she would have thought I was an odd duck indeed. But again, just because the quack sounds strange doesn't mean the quack is wrong.

Where there is *opus* there is *missio*. If there is *opus alienum* there is *missio aliena* (*missio* is a feminine noun), and if I add *dei*, the way Luther did to his *opus* talk, than I've got M.A.D.

Go ahead, say it. MAD, as in Project MAD. So also with the other project, the grander project, *missio propria dei*, M.P.D. Though here, if you want to turn it into something you can say, you've got to add some vowels, the way we might if we were speaking Pidgin Hebrew. Try these, MyPaD, as in John 14, "in my Father's house, ergo in my house, there are many rooms" one of them with *your* name emblazoned on the door.

So then, two projects. Two grand mission projects that God originates and drives. Project MAD. Project MyPaD. The one creates and sustains the reality we know. It summoned us from sleep this morning. It sent us into another day's adventure of surviving in the world. By contrast the other project, the MyPaD project, exists for now only and always as a promise, an intimation of that which shall be, or so God says. I don't see the forgiveness of sins, I hear of it. I believe in it. So also with the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting.

Another Luther thought: God works under the form of the opposite.⁸ So MAD and MyPaD describe the ends, the outcomes, to which the projects drive. They don't as a rule describe our daily experience of the projects themselves. As a rule there is nothing alien, nothing strange, about life in the world as an agent of Project MAD. Fact is it feels familiar, and often homey. There's nothing maddening about a glorious sunset seen from the eastern shore of Lake Erie. Fact is it makes your heart sing. It also heightens the dismay when a storm blows in. There's nothing maddening per se about a farmer's bumper crop, anything but; yet such a thing will drive inexorably to madness, as Jesus observed in his tale about the rich farmer, madness as in folly, madness too as in wrath. So also today. Give an American farmer 10 bumper crops in a row, and in Year 11 he won't be talking to God anymore about the weather—why should I, says he—and God will not be amused. Give a nation 50 years of unbroken peace, prosperity and unmatched social welfare, Project

MAD objectives, all of them, and all of them delightful, and what you wind up with is Sweden, than which no country on earth has less use these days for God.⁹

MyPaD too refers to outcomes and ends that come to pass under the form of the opposite. God, you might say, has a sneaky way of doing things—and if you say that, you’re merely echoing Paul. So to get people home God flings people out, casting them as strangers to the ends of the earth. Think Peter and Paul and the rest of the apostolic crew. Think Boniface among the Germans, Xavier in Japan. Or how about those Westerners who, in the 1930’s, appeared with the word of Christ in what is now the Chimbu Province of Papua New Guinea? I’m told on good authority that the greeting they’d have gotten, standard in traditional Chimbu culture, male to male, was a man reaching out to coddle the other fellow’s crotch and expecting him to coddle back. Look, I’m as Western as they get. I’ll guarantee those newcomers didn’t feel the least bit at home. Yet in and through their homelessness God made a home for Godself among the Chimbu, and there he planted the promise of the home that Christ is making for us all.

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Time out for the big 64 dollar question. Is this MAD and MyPaD business something Burce is spinning from Luther’s overheated rhetoric and nothing more, or can it be grounded where all honest theology has got to be grounded, in the Biblical record of God’s dealing with people? The question these days will center particularly on the first of the projects, the alien one. To say that God aims to drive us mad will strike countless people as outrageous. Dare I say that Joel Osteen won’t believe it? Nor, I fear, will the folks at the GME. It will say to them that God is cruel, and mean.

With that in mind, let's turn to the Bible's first unmistakable mission text, not that anyone I know of has thought to describe it quite that way. Still, once eyes are opened, as happened to me recently, you can't miss it. It isn't Matthew 10 or 28, not John 20, not Acts 1. Would you believe, Genesis 3? It appears at the tail end, when all the big damage is done and said, and now it's time to mop things up. Verse 21: "The Lord God made garments of skins for the man and for his wife, and clothed them. 22Then the Lord God said, 'See, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil; and now, he might reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life, and eat, and live for ever'— 23therefore the Lord God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from which he was taken.

Where "mission" is concerned, the verb is "send." Mitto, mittere, missus est in Latin. In Hebrew, shalach. Verse 23: the Lord God "shalached" him (*yishlachahu*, to be precise) from the garden. He did so for a reason: lest (v. 22) the man should "reach out his hand"— sorry, bad, obscuring translation. Here too the Hebrew verb is "shalach," or again precisely, *yishlach*. Jerome noticed that way back in the 4th century, so that the Vulgate reads "ne forte *mittat* manum suam," lest he *send* his hand.

In other words, the first thought of mission in the Bible is God imagining Adam's self-appointed mission to turn himself from the mini-god he's just become into an everlasting mini-god who will vie with God forever in calling the balls and strikes of good and evil. Talk about catastrophe! To prevent it God launches a counter-mission, a defensive mission, the aim of which is precisely to alienate the man; to send him away; to block and frustrate his implacable desire to have life on his terms, not God's. And if the blocking and frustrating should enrage the man; if it turns him into a stranger dripping with contempt for the maddening God who keeps getting in his way, so

be it. That's the price that must be paid, not because God is mean but because God is good.

Project MAD. Notice, it sends the man against his will—he has no choice in the matter—“to till the ground from which he was taken.” That's the mission. Away he goes, dispatched as *missionary* to fend for himself; to make his own home; to scratch out his own living; to dig his own grave, dust he is, and to dust he shall return, and no it's not just Adam. 23 December 1952. By now I've been nine months in utero, quite happy months, I assume, I don't remember. Suddenly there it is, the big squeeze, the walls of the womb pressing in and pressing down, over and over, and there I am being propelled by God-induced contractions down a path I didn't choose to take, and out I come by God's sending to join the rest of you in scratching out a living from the earth that will swallow me up. No wonder the first thing any of us did on this side of the birth canal was to cry. Whereupon a merciful God, using a nurse or a midwife, did for us as he did for the first man and woman, that is, he clothed our nakedness and eased our pain, and when in our case he tossed in a first suckle at mother's breast, it was downright comforting. The God of Project MAD is not without a heart. He may have pushed us out and away, but no, he hasn't quit caring for the creatures he made. God be praised for this ongoing providence. Without it we couldn't last in Project MAD to the extent that we do.

Back to Adam, Adam the First, that is. Being grownup, he has to go find his own food. Which he does, all the while developing his newly asserted right to distinguish for himself between good and evil, between, for example, the mushroom that nourishes and the mushroom that kills. Notice, the better he gets at this, the greater the distance grows between him and God, the less it seems to him that he really needs a god. Along come the mini-god sons, now turning their quarrel with God into a quarrel with

each other. Before you know it one brother has “missioned” his hand (so to speak) to kill the other, and he in turn is “missioned” away to a starker alienation, a sojourn among strangers. Again God acts defensively. Like that helps. Pretty soon Lamech is bragging about his murders, and Lamech’s granddaughters are having alien sex, as we’d say these days. “Drown ‘em all,” says God, still playing defense. To this day even the pious find him hateful for having said that. Yes, the few are saved, but all too quickly God is playing defense again, now at Babel, this time against the maddening arrogance of Noah’s offspring. So again he ramps up the alienation by confusing their speech, and notice how to this day nothing makes some arrogant Americans madder than hearing Spanish spoken on *their* streets, and if you flip back and forth between MSNBC and Fox News you’ll find arrogant people using the same words to speak quite different languages, red English here and blue English there, and neither group is the least bit interested in trying to grasp what the other is saying, and don’t think for a moment that God doesn’t have something to do with all this, our own intra-American alienation. He who sits in the heavens cackles (Ps. 2). The defense is holding. These guys will never make it on their own, as they are, to the tree of life. Not a chance. They’ll kill each other first and spare God the hassle.

Genesis 12: familiar, important turf. If we learned anything in seminary or in Bible classes taught by able pastors, it’s that something very, very big happens at this point. Indeed it does. The call of Abram, we like to say, though we’d do much better, I think, to describe it as the sending of Abram, or rather, the re-sending of Abram. Remember, Abram too starts off as a son of Adam, sent first, like every other ancient Mesopotamian— every modern American for that matter—to scratch out a momentary living in the ground from which all were taken, the dirt that all are headed to. We call it “making a future for ourselves”;

and wouldn't you know, that's the very thing we're doing, though not in the way we think we're doing it. Again we notice how this first sending is rightly described as Project MAD, God confounding people and giving them the opposite of the object they're reaching for. Be this as it may, one day out of nowhere God interrupts the daily grind of dirt-scratching Abram and gives him a new mission, one that sends him into a new kind of future that no one else in all of Haran is able to imagine. Strictly speaking, it's an impossible future, one that Abram *cannot* make for himself, nor can he conceive it, not conceptually and certainly not literally. Sarai, remember, is withered and old, and so is he. There is one thing—one thing only—that he and she can do (if you can call it doing) to bring that future about, and that's to trust it. More to the point, they're to trust a *promise* that God will make this future *for* them.

"Go," says God. And this, of course, is the launch of Project MyPaD. Notice, "Go" is the key verb, the key imperative. The minute we hear it we hear a mission in the making. We'd do well, I think, to add it to the MyPaD sending moment in our baptismal rites, not "let your light so shine," but "*Go*, let your light so shine before others," the light being *your* trust, *your* Abram-like confidence in the crazy, impossible promise that washed over you just now. Go to a future you cannot fabricate, to a living you cannot scratch out for yourself. And in your going, let people notice how you're clinging like a limpet to the hope of things that cannot be. God be praised if they label you a fool.

Famously, Abram goes. In going, he becomes the first-ever dual missionary, the first person we know of who spends his days caught in the tension between God's two great projects, the MAD project where you arrange your own future or try to, as in the episode with Hagar; the MyPaD project where you and Sarah wait

with patience for God to keep his word and to make the future for you, the promise being that you and yours will wind up at last in a place called home.

Here's what Abram doesn't know, not that he has to know it: the road home will squeeze him through the eye of a needle, a quite impossible cross-shaped needle, and on it the bloodied corpse of a father's pride and joy, a dear son, a one-and-only beloved son, and no, it isn't Isaac.

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One last piece of clarifying and then, at last, the good stuff.

Look, folks, I don't get it. I'm pretty sure that most of you don't get it either. All of us, you see, are Abram types. We wouldn't be here if we weren't. Speaking for myself, I've never known a day when I wasn't, like Abram, a double agent, a two-faced missionary, if you will, on the hand a worker bee in Project MAD and on the other a baptized MyPaD operative. I don't know what it's like to live without the promise, or at least without the blessed tension the promise introduces to the spending of our days in a mad, mad, mad, mad world.

Life without the promise: that's what I don't get. And reading the Bible won't help me get it. That's because from Genesis 12 on the Bible is a Tale of the Two Missions, a tale recorded by double agents for the sake of other double agents as a way of helping them survive the tension they're already in without breaking faith. That shapes how the story is told; so we hear, for example, about the flip flop between terror and joy that the Israelite mother goes through on Exodus Day. What we don't hear about is her Egyptian neighbor's dark despair when she wakes up that same morning to find her baby dead. This helps to explain a weird phenomenon, the one where pious Christians with their noses always in the Bible keep undervaluing the promise as a

gift for other people too, as if we have nothing to say to them, nothing that at least few of them might *want* to hear. Lutherans are notorious for keeping their mouths shut. We make jokes about it, shame on us, and our churches dwindle away. So does our spending on evangelism.

We Lutherans would do well to spend more time with the poets—not our poets, but their poets, the single-mission poets, M.A.D. only. They're the ones who can tell us what life without the promise is like. Take, for example, the ancient Greeks, than whom no one is starker on the subject of guilt. If you kill dad and sleep with mom you pay the penalty, period, and please don't whine about how you didn't know it was mom you were sleeping with. That's no excuse.

Or how about those poets up north, the ones with the nose for impending doom? The frost giants are bound to win, didn't you know, and the only dodge, available to a few (by no means all) is to lead the heroic life that will land you in Valhalla. There you can drink yourself silly with your pals and crow about your slaughters but only for a time. Valhalla itself is headed for the deep freeze, didn't you know?

Anyone been to the multiplex lately? Spent some hours, say, with the Matrix trilogy or any other tale of tomorrow that's been filmed in the last 20 years? Then you'll notice how our Hollywood poets have combined those Greek and Nordic laments and keep singing them, over and over and over again, all of them variations on the same basic tune: we mini- gods are making rotten choices. Because of that the world we've made has got to end, a few, a tiny few, surviving, but only if a butt-kicking small "m" messiah should suddenly appear. That's the Hollywood dirge, 21st century.

And then there's this, an item from Bollywood turf that I

stumbled across by accident three years ago. It's a magnificent novel by an award-winning Indian author named Vikram Chandra, formerly on the faculty at George Washington University and now at Berkeley, where he teaches creative writing. The book's setting is Mumbai. It comes with a telling title, *Sacred Games*. Listen, please, to how it opens:

A white Pomeranian named Fluffy flew out of a fifth-floor window in Panna, which was a brand- new building with the painter's scaffolding still around it. Fluffy screamed in her little lap-dog voice all the way down, like a little white kettle, losing steam, bounced off the bonnet of a Cielo, and skidded to a halt near the rank of schoolgirls waiting for the St. Mary's Convent bus. There was remarkably little blood, but the sight of Fluffy's brains did send the conventeers into hysterics, and meanwhile, above, the man who had swung Fluffy around his head by one leg, who had slung Fluffy into the void, one Mr Mahesh Pandey of Mirage Textiles, that man was leaning on his windowsill and laughing. Mrs Kamala Pandey, who in talking to Fluffy always spoke of herself as 'Mummy', now staggered and ran to her kitchen and plucked from the magnetic holder a knife nine inches long and two wide. When Sartaj and Katekar broke open the door to apartment 502, Mrs Pandey was standing in front of the bedroom door, looking intensely at a dense circle of two-inch-long wounds in the wood, about chest high.¹⁰

And with that, away we go into 900 utterly engrossing pages teeming with characters both major and minor, all of whom—this dawns on you when you get to the end—are like Fluffy the dog, slung into the void by greater powers attending to their own issues of alienation, and on the way down all of them are screaming the same questions in voices peculiar to each, and the questions are Why? To what end? What games are being played, and by whom, with me as pawn? And as each hits their particular

version of the pavement, the questions hang in the air unanswered even as their brains go cold. Does anyone wonder what Luther's *deus absconditus*, the hidden God, is all about? Read this.

Read this, and then let's start as Christian preachers to blush with shame over the hash so many of us made last month of the Gospel text for the Second Sunday of Advent. It was, you may recall, a short little thing, Luke's three-sentence introduction to the ministry of John the Baptist, a text so brief that many preachers, I'm sure, made the bad mistake of thinking not much was there, and they looked around for other things to talk about. The passage starts with a list of big shots in Project MAD, ends with a quotation of one of Isaiah's great MyPaD passages, and in between them this line, the reading of which most of us botched. We botched it because we read it as double agents addressing other double agents for whom the promise is nothing they haven't heard before, so here's what came out: "[John] went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of *repentance* for the forgiveness of sins," emphasis on "repent," as in "must I remind you idiots yet again to grab hold of the good stuff you're merely toying with," to which the answer is, yet again, big yawn. Look, that's not what this passage is about. Notice, John went into *all* the region around the Jordon. That includes the Gentile region, the M.A.D.- only region, the region filled with Fluffies who are constantly repenting, indeed they are, repenting as in twisting and turning on the long way down, grabbing here, there, and everywhere for something, for anything, that will break the fall; that if nothing else will soften the horror of watching the pavement rush at them. Enter John, stage right, with his God-word for *them* of a new thing to turn to, a thing hitherto withheld from single-agent ears, and thus for them a bizarre, impossible thing, hitherto unimagined. It's a baptism of repentance for the

forgiveness of sins—that's how the passage has got to be read, emphasis on "forgiveness," the *forgiveness* of sins as opposed to the counting of sins, the multiplying of sins, the futile, ridiculous denial of sins as you rant away at the powers that be. Forgiveness, says John, is the thing to repent not for, but *into*—the Greek is *eis apheresin*, *eis*, a directional preposition. "Turn here, not there, into this and not to that. That won't help you. This will."

The forgiveness of sins, preached by John to the crowds, to the lackeys, losers and pawns, the two-bit tax collector, the underpaid legionnaire, every one a Fluffy. The word snags them in mid-air. In the game the gods are playing—the Holy One here, the mini-god dirt-tillers over there—it's another new move, an unexpected move. On God's part it's the ultimate offensive move, a genuine game-changer. It's here that God is finally taking MyPaD public, truly public for the first time ever, public as in the promise addressed not just to Abram but to Abimilech too. No wonder Luke kicks things off with that drum roll of Project MAD officialdom, as if to say "It happened; it really did happen; here's *when* it happened."

Luke rolls the drum because for all the newness of the move, it's nonetheless a sneaky move, another piece of MyPaD sleight-of-hand, first a single wandering Aramaean way back when, now a nutcase preaching in the desert with his scruffy finger pointed at somebody born in a manger, a somebody sent and commissioned by God to pull off the sneakiest move of them all. The sneakiest move: it happens—so I contend—at a point in the passion narrative that double-agent Good Friday preachers habitually ignore, the point at which a Fluffy named Barabbas comes tumbling into view, slung there by Pilate in his spat with Caiaphas and company. A robber, John calls him, or according to Mark, a guy nabbed for murder in a failed insurrection, in either case a two-bit no-name loser, and in fact Barabbas is no

proper name at all—a father’s son, that’s what it means. Could be it’s nothing more than a smart aleck’s feeble stab at hiding his real identity. Comes the question: which loser will we crucify? Whereupon Caiaphas—canny Caiaphas, the Project MAD enforcer who unlike Pilate knows a real threat to God’s law and God’s order when he sees one—Caiaphas picks Jesus. “Gotcha,” says God, the sneaky God who for Fluffy’s sake has just pulled the ultimate fast one on himself. Watch now and marvel as his best enforcer slings the real Bar Abbas into the void, Bar as in The Son, the only-begotten, the best-beloved, Abba as in Father, capital F. This Barabbas is the real insurgent, God in the flesh of Fluffy-for-us, tumbling to his doom. Mark and Matthew record his scream as the pavement nears, eloi, eloi, why, why, why? He hits. Look, this is God-for-us slamming head first into God-against-us, an event even more profound than matter meeting anti-matter. It sets off a chain reaction at the core of the cosmos where the logic of Project MAD has just been smashed to smithereens—I’m speaking fancifully, of course. Less than 48 hours later there’s a sudden explosion on the surface of the earth as we know it. We call it Easter.

And for the import of that explosion, flip back one page in Luke’s gospel to a passage Good Friday preachers do tend to notice. That’s the one where Fluffy on the right twists as far as the spikes will let him, and in that twisting he repents *into* Fluffy-for-us. “Remember me,” he says.

You know the answer, of course. “Today you’ll be with me in Paradise.” In Johannine translation, “Where I am going, you will be also. Welcome, fellow loser, to MyPaD, and if to MyPaD, then to Dad’sPad too.”

Easter means first and last that when Project MAD has run its course we’re headed home to yes, The Best Life Ever, a life better by far than anything the average American begins to

imagine when she hears the word “heaven.” Try John of Patmos: “I looked, and I saw a new heaven, a new earth, and the sea was no more...” When you crack *that* walnut open and pick out the meat, you’re looking at one fantastic promise. God’s promise. Our mission. Our proper mission, M.P.D.

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Folks, I’m watching the watch. It’s what the guy at the podium has got to do when we operate, as we must—we have no choice—with the exigencies of Project MAD. If the guy rattles on, the schedule gets broken, the audience gets cheesed, and smoke starts pouring from the time-keeper’s ears. Sniff the air at that point, and you’ll notice how the acrid scent of alienation is starting to permeate the room. And if somewhere in the three hours’ worth of stuff still to cover lie things that God would have one say, he too can be expected to frown. That’s how M.A.D. works.

This noted, let’s get to the bottom line, the closing cadenza. God’s promise is our mission. I speak now of the people right here in this room, people as bound, committed, and enmeshed as anybody else in that other mission, M.A.D. It’s part of the genius—the sneaky genius—of M.P.D. that God keeps using the likes of us to pull it off.

One last riff on that notion of sneakiness.

Another way of describing God’s proper mission would be to call it the Mission of Christ the Robber, Christ Bar Abbas who takes the robber’s place; who in taking his place starts robbing like no robber has ever robbed before, or ever will. He robs God of his righteous wrath. He robs Adam of his right—his otherwise justifiable right—to say that God hates him. He robs Eve of her right, so often justifiable, to hate Adam; to despise him as a no account loser; to revel in her estrangement from him; to make

the divorce permanent.

What Christ does, to put it bluntly, crudely even, is to steal the guts out of Project MAD. And here's the thing: no one save God knows what he's up to when he does this, least of all the chief operatives, the rulers of this age as Paul calls them. "If they had [known] they would not have crucified the Lord of Glory" (1 Cor. 2:8). After all, alienation is their stock in trade and the source of their power.

The mission of Christ the robber. In scholar-speak you would call it *missio Christi latronis*, M.C.L. Again, let's do the Pidgin Hebrew thing and insert some vowels, the same ones we stuck in M.P.D. Here's what you get: MyCaL.

My call, your call, our call together. It's to preach Christ, to push Christ, to peddle Christ. To live, and yes, to die with Christ, emphasis for now on "die." Observe: MyCaL kicked in for me at Holy Baptism, when the Holy Spirit grabbed this Fluffy by the leg and slung me into the void all over again, only this time I'm not screaming. Instead, like Paul and Silas in that Philippian jail, I'm singing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs to the astonishment of all. More to the point, I'm twisting, turning, repenting *into* the other Fluffies who are falling all around me and I'm passing on the crazy promise of life beyond the pavement. And if they believe—when they believe—I'm robbing them of fear and horror, of resignation and dark despair. Or so God intends for it to be where I'm concerned. God grant that it sometimes is.

Speaking as a pastor, I love Christian funerals. It's where I see the culmination of my call in tear-filled eyes and wavering voices that sparkle with hope even so. The contrast between that and the funeral where the promise isn't heard, or if heard isn't believed—I've been at some, presided at one or two—could not be

starker.

I posit the following for your consideration. Christ, your Lord and mine, has earned the right to see every human being get the chance—at least the chance—of dying with him. Dying with him, as opposed to dying without him.

This too I posit, that when the church ignores or sets aside its proper mission it is robbing the Robber of his right, or is trying to. To use a walnut word of old, we filch his glory.

Osteen is a glory filcher. So are the scholars and church leaders who push peace, justice, and the preservation of the present world as the church's key task in A.D. 2010. So are pastors and congregations who keep shirking the basic task of evangelism, the passing of the promise; who make it their mission to coddle the insiders, and to hell with those are freezing in the dark for want of the Word that will warm them. Blankets? Sure, we'll pass out those—how kind of us to do so—but no, not the word. That makes us feel silly. It seems so empty, so presently unhelpful. They may not want it. We fear to give offense.

This reminds me that Christ Bar Abbas is not just a robber, he's also a rebel with insurgency on his mind. Jesus plays offense. He'll thumb his nose at Sabbath law and raise a ruckus in the temple to the consternation of his fellow Jews. He'll stomp on reason, logic, and the demands of justice, M.A.D.-style, to the horror of the Greeks. He'll preach the impossible and flash it from time to time with a miracle here and there, and if the poobahs deem this impolite or impolitic, if it moves them to murder him, so be it. For Fluffy's sake, that's what he came for.

I'm reminded too of the apostolic hero of St. John's Gospel, not Peter, but Thomas, the guy who bears the ultimate witness to

Jesus crucified for us and risen from the dead. Thomas also makes an appearance when Jesus heads for Bethany and the raising of Lazarus, the particular assault on Project MAD that will seal his doom. You'll recall, I'm sure, how Thomas turns to the other disciples and goads them into coming along. "Let us also go," he says, "that we may die with him." Or in 21st century American English: "C'mon boys. Let's roll."

And that's the charge I leave you with: "Let's roll."

Let's roll by grasping our MyPaD identity as robbers with Christ, our larceny aimed at the deadly certainties that people live and die with today in Project MAD.

Let's roll by remembering that MyCaL is not to rule the world, still less to save the world in the sense of postponing its demise, but rather to undermine and trouble the world with the promise of an Easter world, secretly in the making; a promise—let's face it—that lots of people can't bear to believe, though some will. At which point, says Jesus, the angels in heaven start clapping their hands.

Speaking of those dear disbelievers—Bob Bertram's wonderful term—let's roll by honoring them and thanking God for them. They're out there in their untold millions, attending to their single agent mission of caring for the only world they know. They care, so many of them, with breathtaking skill and generosity and basic human decency. Yes, let's work with them as the fellow agents in Project MAD that indeed we are. But then let's roll by commending to them as much of that M.A.D. care mission as they'll allow us to hand off, and by daring in Christ to concentrate on the mission both proper and peculiar to us as God's double agents, no, not digging wells, but turning on the tap of living water. If we don't do that, no one will.

Among ourselves, let's roll by rising up when other MyPaD

operatives start bending the knee to Project MAD imperatives; when they set aside their proper mission for the sake of playing nice, or respecting others, or padding the endowment fund. Let's roll by complaining the way Ed Schroeder complains when the real deal promise is missing from sermons, from meetings, from publications and classrooms where it out to be found. Let's roll by objecting when the word "gospel" gets tossed around among colleagues in uncracked walnut form, as if everyone knows what everyone else is talking about when they use the word. Fact is, they don't. This too is a fact, that they won't like it at all when we dare to point this out.

So let's roll also by sucking it up, so to speak; by understanding all over again that MyPaD is God's offensive mission; that you can't play offense without giving offense; that you can't play holy robber without inviting suppression. Let's roll by going with Thomas not to live with Christ but to die with Christ in whatever form that dying may take.

Let's roll by roiling the mini-god masters of Project MAD with our promises of things impossible, gifts of God beyond their reach, their control, their power to fabricate. They make it their aim to squelch such dreams. Let's defy them. Let's fall for Fluffy, let's reach for Fluffy, let's refuse to quit when Fluffy herself, lost in her alienation, should bite the hand that seeks to grab her. "So be it," says Jesus, as he shows us his hands. "For Fluffy's sake don't you dare dumb down the promise. Tumble on!"

And to all these ends, let's roll by begging the Holy Spirit, font and source of all things impossible, to purge and fortify our own hearts, re-turning us day after day into the promise of Christ for us and all that this portends. Then let him sling us into whatever piece of the void he would have us occupy and trouble this day with our serene confidence in God, the very God

who will push us away and wear us down and drive us to death as the hours, the days, and the years fly by; the God who even so has long since proved his righteousness, the new kind, that is; the MyPaD Easter version.

“You’re going home,” the Spirit says. “You’re going home. Be not afraid—and pass the word.”

God’s promise. Our mission. Let’s roll.

+ Soli Deo Gloria +

Endnotes

1 Edward H. Schroeder, “Lutheranism’s Crying Need: A Mission Theology for the 21st Century” (online: https://crossings.org/archive/ed/Augsburg_Mis_EHS09.pdf, accessed January 2010), 4.

2 Robert W. Bertram, “Doing Theology in Relation to Mission” (online: <https://crossings.org/archive/bob/DoingTheologyinMission.pdf>, accessed January, 2010)

3 Schroeder, *op. cit.*, 3.

4 Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible’s Grand Narrative* (Downer’s Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 2006), 63.

5 For a sampling of Schroeder’s critique search on “missio dei” at www.crossings.org.

6 In the proof of Thesis 16. “Heidelberg Disputation,” in *Luther’s Works V. 31* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1957), 51

7 Paul Althaus touches briefly on this distinction in several places in his overview of Luther’s theology. See, for example,

at p. 120. *The Theology of Martin Luther*, tr. Robert C. Schultz (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1963).

8 *Ibid.*, 119.

9 Why this is so merits a paper unto itself, a central focus of which would be an exploration of dimensions to Paul's "the law brings wrath" and Melanchthon's *lex semper accusat* that receive too little attention.

10 Vikram Chandra, *Sacred Games* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2007), 3.

11 Robert W. Bertram, "Postmodernity's CRUX," in *A Time for Confessing*, ed. Michael Hoy (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2008), 173

[Missio Christi Latronis \(PDF\)](#)

Werner Elert's Law/Gospel Textbook on Christian Ethics

Colleagues,

Cathy Lessmann, Crossings Conference organizer, asks me to invite Crossings folks from the St. Louis area to the eucharist scheduled for the final evening of the conference, January 26 at 7 p.m. The place is the Chapel at the conference site, Our Lady of the Snows, Belleville, Illinois. Homilist for the liturgy is ELCA Bishop Marcus Lohrmann, formerly pastor at Good Shepherd Lutheran congregation in the St. Louis suburb of Hazelwood.

One of my assignments at that Crossings conference on Monday Jan. 25 is to show and tell the group what Werner Elert is doing in his book on Christian ethics. Here's a trial run for today's ThTh post. [I got through only one-half of the text by this Wednesday evening, so that's what you get here. Wanna hear the rest? Well then, sign up for the conference—even at this eleventh hour!]

Elert didn't title his book "Christian Ethics," but "Christian Ethos." And that for a very specific reason. He saw the subject matter of Christian ethics not to be Christian morality, or Christian claims for what is right and wrong behavior, but what it is that makes anything—better, any person—"right or wrong," "sinful or righteous." Just as the task of dogmatics, he claimed, is to study the church's "dogma," so the job in Christian ethics is to study Christian "ethos." For ethos Elert uses the ancient definition. Ethos is the value, the worth, the "quality" predicated to persons and actions.

Simple illustration. At the end of the first day of creation in Genesis 1, God looks at the light just created and says "good." It's no longer just light, but "good" light. When such verdicts are made about people, that's ethos. Ethics is the study of human ethos, what all is going on with ethos labels—good or bad, right or wrong, sinful or righteous. Theological ethics studies human ethos according to God's evaluations. "Christian" ethics studies human ethos when Christ is in the mix.

Now to Elert's own text. Here is the table of contents from the front of the book. I will add under each of the 63 sub-sections in the ten chapters the basic thesis sentences that come in each sub-section.

THE CHRISTIAN ETHOS by Werner Elert

Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION

1. The Task

- [Basically what is written above in my introduction]

2. Ethics Within the Framework of Theology

- Studying dogma (in dogmatics) and ethos (in ethics) means looking for the “sufficient grounds, the adequate support” for the Christian dogma, and for Christian ethos. Basically answering the Why? question. Why, for what reason, is this claim—of dogma, of ethos—true? In ethics: why, for what reason, is someone/some action given the value/quality called “sinful” or “righteous,” wrong or right? The ethicist keeps on asking until he finds “reason enough” for the claim.
- Dogmatics and ethics are often covered by the term “systematic theology,” but they are two different projects, looking for the sufficient groundings of two different things—dogma and ethos.
- Nevertheless the two are connected. Not in the fashion often proposed: (dogma) what you should believe and (ethos) how you should act. But dogma is “what has to be proclaimed in order that people hear the Gospel,” and ethos is the quality/value change in people when they trust that Gospel.

3. The Arrangement of the Subject Matter

- Since God’s verdict on people is twofold—law and gospel—this ethics book will have two major parts: ethos under law, ethos under grace. We’ll start with ethos under law because that is the ethos of all human beings from birth. That ethos doesn’t change

unless/until Christ enters their lives.

- When Christ does enter their lives, that brings a new ethos, but the conflict between old ethos and new ethos then marks their lives. In simple terms: sinner and saint at the same time.
- We'll have a final third part in the book after Part 1 and Part 2, law ethos and grace ethos. Elert calls that "objective" ethos, in distinction to the "subjective" ethos of parts one and two. "Subjective" is used here to discuss the ethos of individual human subjects. Part 3 looks at the ethos (value, quality factors) in the new community of Christ the head now linked to these Christian "subjects" of his body. This is the ethos of the church, the body of Christ, as a whole. It has ethos elements that are more than just adding up the ethos of the individual members.

Part 1 ETHOS UNDER LAW

Chapter 1. THE CREATURE

4. The Image of God

- the first "value word" in the Genesis creation story about humans is "image of God."
- That term means that humans "mirror" God. How so? God "speaks" the creation into existence. Adam mirrors God in being gifted to hear God talk to him and being able to respond, a response-able message-receiver and message-sender. Not an object or thing, but a subject, a person.
- So it was in "paradise," but the mirror shattered. The fractured image of God still responds to God, but that human self is now a rebel. Human history is the history of these fractured mirrors.

5. Fear and Conscience

- In Genesis 3—after the fall—we see the fractured image of God in action. Three new realities are in the humans: Fear of what's coming (they hide), a conscience at work evaluating what they've done (it wasn't me; she did it), and the law of retribution. Conscience tells them that they have done wrong, so they fear the future because they perceive a law at work saying that in the future they shall have to pay for what they did. They no longer control their own destiny. These three realities now shape all human history.

6. Biographical Limitations and Qualifications

- The totality of my biography is everything predicated to my name.
- My life is limited to the time between my birth and death, to a specific place in human history.
- I am placed in a number of specific relationships and given a vast number of specifics for my own life that I did not choose. When value-judgments, quality-labels, come upon me (=my personal ethos), these are the spaces and places, the "givens" of my own creaturehood, where all that takes place. Luther's term for these givens of my personal creaturely life was "Ordnungen," the "specs," the interwoven networks, of my personal existence where God has "ordained" my life to unfold.

7. The Contingent Encounter

- Another item that limits and puts "specs" into my life is "chance" encounters with all sorts of other people—parents, teachers, neighbors, enemies, etc.
- The Good Samaritan parable is a good illustration. None of the three travellers in the story expected to run into the victim half-dead at the roadside. It

happened by chance. But when they did encounter him, it was a moment that impacted the ethos of each of them.

- Every such chance encounter reminds me of my status as image of God, now confronting another image of God who mirrors to me God in this neighbor. The three in the parable were not only compelled to respond TO this victim-neighbor, but also responsible FOR him. Two responded irresponsibly, one responsibly. But all did respond. Yet if I were responsible FOR everybody I meet “by chance,” I could never manage that overwhelming responsibility. We seemingly HAVE TO do what the priest and Levite did, pass by the victim. We are “stuck” in a fallen world, and are not left off the hook.

Chapter 2. THE LAW OF GOD

8. Security and Retribution

- Biblical term for law (nomos) encompasses everything in God’s creation. It also describes mankind’s initial, call it “natural,” relationship to God.
- God’s Law does two things. It provides security in the now-fallen creation. It carries out retribution.
- Our “law” linkage to God puts us into three networks (Elert’s term is Gefüge) with God: God as our creator (that we exist at all), as our legislator (thou shalt, shalt not), as our judge (you failed in your image-of-God assignment). From our conception onward it’s nomological existence. Law’s three networks permeate everything.

9. The Decalogue

- Why Christians still make use of the decalogue is first of all because Jesus did.
- Jesus and the apostles after him re-interpret the

decatalogue in the New Testament: Love fulfills the law.

- Yet the decatalogue remains a law of retribution in the NT.

10. The Twofold Use of the Law (back to the security and retribution above)

- There is fundamental disagreement in Christian history about God's law. Calvin's catechism, e.g., completely ignores God as judge in the law's third network, focusing only on God the legislator (law-giver).
- In his own use of God's law Jesus intensifies, internalizes and universalizes the law's accusing function. No one escapes.
- In inter-personal relationships and in society at large, God's law protects the "orders," and also protects us within those orders.

11. Natural Law

- "Natural law" is discussed throughout human history and in Christian theology. It too carries out the two tasks for which God uses law—in classical Latin terms: *usus proprius* (unique use as critic) and *usus politicus* (use to preserve the "polis," human society). Natural law too critiques us, and it also preserves human society. In the now-fallen "natural" world, evil is present. It too now functions as an "order" within God's creation, an order of destruction.

Chapter 3. THE NATURAL ORDERS

12. Order, Community, Offices

13. The Family

14. Marriage

15. "The People" as an Order

16. State and Law as Orders
17. The Ethos of the State
18. The Ethos of Citizenship
19. Economic Interdependence
20. Vocation
21. Truth, Oath, and Honor

Before God addresses us with “thou shalt and thou shalt not” (=law as network [Gefüge] #2), we are already linked to God in law as network #1, the manifold “givens,” the specs of our own life. The German word “Gefüge” carries the notion of being joined as jig-saw.puzzle pieces are. Elert’s long list of “natural orders” are those many jig-saw puzzles wherein each of us lives as a distinct piece interlocked with other people and the manifold other realities of daily life. Elert here is proposing the proper understanding of the Lutheran term “orders of creation.” Not orders as commands (how to behave), but orders as the specs of the playing field where God has ordered (= ordained) me to live out my life. It is first of all when I am already IN these orders that God’s thou shalt/ shalt not’s are addressed to me. E.g., I couldn’t possibly “honor my father and mother” if I were not already in an “order” called family.

It is within these orders that I live my nomological (law-permeated) existence.

- it is “pressured” (coercive) existence.
- retributive
- response-able
- linked to God in the three jig-saw puzzles wherein God is:
1) creator/controller, 2) legislator, and 3) judge and (finally) executioner.
- it is accused (guilty) existence, yet it is
- preserved existence.

In all of the #13 to #21 sub-sections of God’s manifold

ordainings Elert traces these themes of nomological existence. He gives hints now and then that you will have to come into contact with “ethos under grace” before you can fully understand this particular order. He also points out the distortions that threaten each of these orders when the person in that order is not “graced” with the new ethos Christ brings. But before we get to that new ethos, there is jigsaw puzzle #3, God as evaluator, judge and executioner

Chapter 4. SIN AND GUILT

22. The Bondage of the Will

- Why do injustice and wicked action persist in human history? Human will after the fall is “bound” to operate as sinner.
- The foundations of the doctrine of the bondage of the will are given in our nomological existence.
- In the debate over human will—Erasmus and Luther, Kant and Luther—Luther claims: Yes, God says “Thou shalt,” but the reality is that we are unable to do it. Erasmus and Kant: If God says, Thou shalt, then we must be able to do it; if Luther is right, we will go mad. Luther can cope with such madness because he sees Christ in the picture to resolve the dilemma of God’s impossible demand. Erasmus and Kant seek to solve it without Christ.

23. Sin as Original Sin

- Augustine led western theologians to adopt a biological interpretation of original sin. The corrupted nature of parents is reproduced in their children. Not a good idea. Biblically, o.s. is grounded in the divine judgment that is pronounced upon us. There is no point in our biography where we are not sinners. O.s. is not a deed, but the shape of the person of the doer, the constant

“inclination” to live “without fear of God, without faith in God, and curved into ourselves” (AC II).

- “Original” means that since birth (our personal origin) we are in opposition to God and also that this opposition is the origin of the “sins” we commit.
- Everyone is personally responsible (guilty) for his own original sin.

24. The Fear of Truth

- Sin is a theological concept, not sociological or psychological. It pertains only to the God-human relationship.
- Law exposes sin by showing us that we are already “outside of the law’s boundaries.”
- Law reveals not only that we oppose the law, but also that this is personal opposition to God. It is finally an attack upon God’s being our judge.
- We cannot grasp what sin really is, but only experience it. It is the incomprehensibility of our nomological existence. It is the primal “as if” of our life. We live as if we were righteous. This constant “as if” is our dread of truth. We do not wish to be sinners, but that refusal says No to what God says. It is enmity against God, opposition to his judgeship.

25. Sins

- Civil courts can adjudicate crimes and misdemeanors, but not sins. Only in God’s courtroom is sin adjudicated.
- The N.T. speaks of a “sin unto death.” That is the refusal to believe in Christ. If one has no desire for forgiveness, one cannot obtain it. “Blasphemy against the Holy Spirit” occurs when one has experienced the power of Christ’s spirit and

declares it to be the spirit of Satan. That perverts truth into a lie. Such mortal sin cannot be rectified.

26. Guilt and Death

- Sin entails both liability and indebtedness, which brings with it guilt, our guilt for our “having been disloyal to God.”
- We are totally guilty before God, and there is no “insofar as.” When God pronounces his judgment of “guilty” upon us, it represents the maximum penalty. The enmity of the creature against the Creator is not only a formal violation of the law but a denial of the real source of our existence. The guilt arising from our opposition to the Creator calls for expiation. Atonement for this guilt can be rendered by a total loss of existence, by replacing culpable existence with non-existence.
- That is the door by which death enters the field of ethics. Death, though also a biological process, is theologically an “ethos” event, God’s verdict that a sinner is not “worthy” of survival. Death is the only event in human life which cannot be treated as if it were not true.

27. Total Guilt

- [Here Elert treats a new problem that arose after World War II. He completed the manuscript in the summer of 1948, just three years after Germany’s defeat in WWII. He confronts the question whether every individual German was responsible and collectively guilty for the actions of Hitler. His discussion here is deep and difficult to summarize in a few sentences. He links it to the larger Biblical understanding of collective guilt. The guilt of a father affects the children, the guilt of

a Führer affects a whole nation, the guilt of one people affects other peoples. The chain of guilt is endless. He concludes with a quote from Luther: "He who wants to be a part of the community must suffer and share the burdens, dangers, and losses of the community, though not he but his neighbor has caused them." To which Elert adds: "There is no way any one of us can emigrate from God's judgment," and concludes with the Psalmist: "If I ascend to heaven, thou art there; if I make my bed in Sheol, thou art there."]

Part II

ETHOS UNDER GRACE

Chapter 5. THE ENCOUNTER WITH CHRIST

28. Christ's Place in History [Better translation: The Place of Christ in Christian Ethics]

- The encounter with Christ changes a person's theological ethos.
- The quest for the "historical Jesus" testifies to the importance of his having been present and active in human history. For our initial theological ethos (sinner) would not be changed if he had never existed.
- The encounter with Christ exposes the falsehood of the sinner's "as if" existence, for the truth Christ brings is the truth about me.

29. The Friend of Sinners

- Christ befriended sinners. Yet everyone agrees (his enemies too) that Jesus was not a sinner.
- The encounter with Christ produces the recognition that a) he is not a sinner; b) I am far removed from him.

- In the encounter with Christ the “sinner in reality” becomes a “sinner in truth” (no more “as if” deception) but the conclusion to the encounter is “grace,” for God pardons the sinner. The question still remains: Is Christ’s verdict, “You are no longer a sinner,” God’s verdict?

30. The Atonement

- The answer to that question is, of course, yes. Here’s how:
- Confronting Christ today means answering the question with these words: he is the “Word of grace” for ME.
- Christ’s death is God’s judgment on us, in two ways. He dies because he befriended us sinners, and his death is God’s judgment upon every one of us.
- The curse of nomological existence puts Christ on the cross—AND his cross brings life-under-the-law to an end. “Christ is the end of the law [=nomological existence], so that everyone who has faith may be justified” (=given the new ethos of a righteous non-sinner). The risen Christ is God’s verification, ratification, that Christ’s new ethos-offer to sinners is God’s own. Without Easter the old ethos persists.

31. Lord and Master

- The new ethos is real, not imaginary, grounded in a forgiveness verdict, and thus we live IN grace by continuous connection with Christ. Lord and Master are two NT terms for this connection. There are more.
- Christ’s lordship is not “legalistic lordship” (Latin: imperium), to rule as emperor.
- His lordship is a “gracious lordship,” (Latin: dominium). He rules as servant.
- As “master” (teacher) Jesus does not “teach” us what

we are to do. He IS what we are to do.

- Christ's teaching task (Christ as master) continues throughout history after his ascension.

Coming at the Crossings conference—and probably as next week's ThTh —will be similar basic theses for the last five chapters of the book.

Chapter 6. THE NEW CREATURE

Chapter 7. THE NEW OBEDIENCE

Chapter 8. THE INVISIBLE STRUGGLE

Part III OBJECTIVE ETHOS

Chapter 9. THE CHRISTIAN TOTALITY

Chapter 10. THE CHURCH AND FORCES OF HISTORY

Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder

Stephen C. Krueger In Memoriam

Colleagues,

I flew to Tampa last Friday for Steve Krueger's memorial service Saturday morning, January 9. His wife Wendy had asked me to take part in the service. Steve celebrated his 60th birthday on Sept 9, 2009. He died early January 5 a few minutes after midnight.

Before I left home I printed out hard copies of the ThTh posts

that I could find that Steve had done for us over the years—nine of them. [I found two more when I got back home!] I took the nine along for Wendy and read them once more on my flight down to Tampa.

And besides those [now eleven] ThTh posts, Steve was Mike Hoy's "guest writer" for the second-last issue of our Crossings printed newsletter, Michaelmas 2009. In that newsletter Steve crosses the promising Gospel with his own dying. I took along a bunch of extra copies of that newsletter for Wendy to hand out to the family and the congregation. And then to my surprise, Pastor Jack Palzer (Seminex '79), who crafted the liturgy at the Kruegers' congregation (Calvary Lutheran, Apollo Beach FL), stopped just before the benediction and read the newsletter text, Steve's "last sermon," out loud to all of us.

That is a creme-de-la-creme homily. You might want to check it again on the Crossings website. [www.crossings.org Click on Newsletter. Click on Michaelmas 2009.] It's all about baptism, Steve's own, his joy in confessing "baptizatus sum," and appropriating its Good News for himself as he moves into the valley of the shadow of death. With his "big death" now trumped by Christ in that "baptizatus sum," he tells us what he sees as he faces his "little death" moving relentlessly toward him.

And besides all those publications, Steve has for this past year been doing a great good deed for the Crossings community by preparing abstracts for the 100-plus Bertram & Schroeder articles and essays in the Crossings website Library. For some of my stuff, his abstract is better than the original. We'll have to look far and wide to find someone to finish that task.

Back to those eleven ThTh offerings Steve gave us. Here's the list [and there may be more that I haven't yet found].

1. Thursday Theology 96 The Promising Tradition For A Time To

Confess (in the LCMS)

<https://crossings.org/thursday/2000/thur0413.shtml>

2. ThTh 292 "Lord, Bless This Mess, Please!" A Sermon at the Daystar Conference.

<https://crossings.org/thursday/2004/thur011504.shtml>

3. ThTh 296. Steve reviews Martin Marty's book on Martin Luther

<https://crossings.org/thursday/2004/thur021204.shtml>

4. ThTh 343 Tsunami Preaching in the 12 Days of Christmas
Steve's sermon to his San Diego CA congregation after the Indonesian

catastrophe <https://crossings.org/thursday/2005/thur010605.shtml>

5. ThTH 436 Hospice Reflections on John 11

Steve takes us on a stunning walk through the Lazarus text in John and crosses it over to his new pastoral calling as chaplain at LifePath Hospice in Florida. This is a one-of-a-kind brilliant essay, crossing current clinical pastoral care (or un-care) in the face of death with the Christian Gospel. Steve says: "This essay is about death as we experience dying in hospice care in America today and the Promise. Its thesis is that while hospice care offers an extraordinary set of medical, psychological and even spiritual supports to assist the dying to die, linking the terminally ill and their care-givers to the Promise still is the needed ministry from the confessing Christian community. In recognizing that, hospice is important new ground for the church's mission but a ministry that can only be done with compassion, sensitivity, insight and care." <https://crossings.org/thursday/2006/thur101906.shtml>

6. ThTh 476 A review of John H. Tietjen's book, published posthumously, "The Gospel According to Jesus."

<https://crossings.org/thursday/2007/thur072607.shtml>

7. ThTh 492 A book review of "Mother Teresa: Come Be My

Light.”

Mother Teresa’s self-revelation of her own faith struggles with Steve’s gentle reminder of an item from Luther for coping with “Anfechtung” and despair.<https://crossings.org/thursday/2007/thur111507.shtml>

8. ThTh 557 Jesus in the New Testament: Just How Real is He?
Steve’s review of Ernest Werner’s book chronicling his struggle—from days at Concordia Seminary in the 1950s on into retirement—to find the truth about Jesus.<https://crossings.org/thursday/2009/thur021209.shtml>
9. ThTh 559 Steve’s review of a book on Pope Benedict XVI
<https://crossings.org/thursday/2009/thur022609.shtml>
10. ThTh 569 Testing Benedict XVI By the Company He Keeps
A follow-up on the item above in response to some responses Steve received on ThTh 559<https://crossings.org/thursday/2009/thur050709.shtml>
11. ThTh 598. Primacy of Popes and the Promise.
On Thanksgiving Day 2009, a month before Steve himself enters hospice care, he reviews for us THE HISTORY OF THE POPES by John W. O’Malley, S.J. The very last words of that review were Steve’s own mantra in every one of the items listed above: “first and foremost reorienting all things to the ‘compass of the Gospel.’” <https://crossings.org/thursday/2009/thur112609.shtml>

Not only was he a major player in the work of the Crossings community for a long time, but he had been doing Crossings-theology day in and day out in his pastoral work in the several different congregations where he served before moving to Florida to become a hospice chaplain in the very institution where he died.

My part in the memorial service was labelled Eulogy. I had something prepared, but when I walked into the sanctuary the centerpiece Jack Palzer had constructed up front and center (Wendy said it was his handiwork) compelled me to do a quick mental rewrite.

The baptismal font at Calvary Lutheran is located in front of the altar railing in the center aisle. It's configured with running water coming from a large shell flowing toward the congregation and caught up in a catch basin. Jack had placed the Christ candle up against the backside of the font and Steve's picture on a small table directly in front of it. It was the same photo that was in the Michaelmas newsletter.

This visual image said it all, all that Steve himself had written for that newsletter. The risen Christ of the Christ candle connected to Steve through the water of baptism – and the water was still flowing!

My revised opening line was to say that previous sentence, and then to follow with this: Wendy and Steve Krueger invited Marie and me into their family nearly 30 years ago when they asked us to be godparents for son number three, Matthew. Last evening at the family gathering Matthew asked me "what one word would you choose to describe my dad as you knew him?" I told him I couldn't do that with just one word, at least not yet, for Steve Krueger impacted my life for almost 40 years. That's half of my life, two-thirds of his, and I told Matthew about some of that history. But his request for just one word stayed with me through the night and somewhere around 3:00 a word came to me. It was his own name, Stephen, the Greek word for "crown." So I'm going to walk quickly through the seven letters of his name with "crown" in mind at every one.

S is for seminarian.

Steve was a super student, although I'm sure if he heard me say this he would tell me No, Ed, S is for sinner – and then for saint.

T is for theologian.

Theo-logy is talk about God. Steve was able to talk about deep stuff and not only make it easy for us to understand but always when he was done to hear that his God-talk came out as good news for sinners like all of us.

E is for evangelist.

Evangel means good news, to talk about God and have it come out as something cheerful, joyful, for everybody.

P could be for prince, as in crown prince, but Steve would surely want me to say pastor.

In fact I want to say PP, pastor to pastors, and that he did in two internet communities, the Daystar group of mostly Missouri Synod folks and the Crossings community of mostly ELCA people. Steve had no qualms about playing both sides of the street, and he did so in crown prince fashion.

H is for human, human strengths and human weaknesses.

I know much more about the former, but I know there were the latter as well.

E is for eloquent.

Steve was gifted with language to be theologian, which means to talk about God, and to be an evangelist, to speak about the good news of Christ and have it come out sounding so marvelously good and refreshingly new. And all of that because of the next letter,

N is for Nazareth, Jesus of Nazareth,

the one whose resurrection candle stands there together with the

baptismal water that started flowing for Steve 60 years ago and has not stopped.

Steve was hooked on Jesus of Nazareth. He was hooked by Jesus of Nazareth. And here with this candle, font, and photo we see Steve still hooked to Jesus of Nazareth.

That's what he tells us in his final sermon that Pastor Palzer will soon read to us. Stephen's name means crown, but he would be the first to tell each one of us that our baptismal connection to Christ puts crowns on our heads too.

One of Steve's teachers and my own teacher too, Bob Bertram, taught both of us that there are two different ways to die. One is to die without the Christ connection, with no connection to the one and only one who has conquered the big death. Bob called that "death, period!" For from that moment on, you are eternally dead. The other one is "death, comma." For when you die connected to Christ, there is one more chapter still to come for you. It's the same current chapter that Christ enjoys, namely, resurrection.

I'll never forget the candle, font and photo linked here before us. It's a vivid picture of "death, comma," and Steve would remind us if we forget everything that happened here this morning, that your and my connection to Christ assures us of another chapter coming. Steve would tell us to trust that, not because he said so, but because the risen Christ says so. Anyone who lays down his life for you is someone you can surely trust.

Jesus, Age 12, at the Temple

Colleagues,

I was asked to be the homilist on the last Sunday of 2009 at our home congregation here in St. Louis, Bethel Lutheran. Here's the manuscript I prepared. Most of it got proclaimed.

Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder

The Gospel for the First Sunday after Christmas: Luke 2:41-52.

Jesus, age 12, at the Temple.

At Immanuel parochial school, Rock Island, Illinois, 70 years ago, the punchline of this text that we kids memorized was: "Wist ye not that I must be about my father's business?" That word "business" has some advantages over the current translation, "father's house." [Neither noun is actually in the Greek text.]

So what is his Father's business?

Luke would say: Read my next 22 chapters. We'll be doing that throughout 2010 nearly every Sunday.

Let's stop at just two places:

- The almost last verse of Luke's gospel 24:47f. " . . . that repentance and the forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in my name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses."
- a chapter in the middle: Luke 15. Three parables of the

lost: sheep, coin, boys.

—So what's the Father's business? finding, rescuing, God's own lost kids. Bringing the lost kids back home.

In Bible vocabulary those two phrases are synonyms: Repentance & forgiveness = turn around & come home.

So who is lost? That's what Jesus may have been discussing with the theologians already at age 12. For it became the constant topic with these same temple managers, yes, the constant barricade Jesus ran into as a grown man, when he went about the Father's business FULL TIME.

Luke 15 is already an answer: Two sorts of God's lost kids. The run-away renegade hell-raiser, the patent commandment-breaker, AND the elder brother who "played it straight" but showed at the end that he loved neither his Father nor his brother, thus breaking the two BIG commandments. The Father's business is to get both sorts back home. But it won't be easy.

Is this all Ho, hum, goldie-oldie religion talk? Repentance and forgiveness of sins? Kids lost to God and being found again? Come on, preacher, we're now in a secular age. Not too many folks interested in such stuff anymore. Pastor Bill Yancey's pizza-man in his sermon two weeks ago said it: "None of those guys working for me care about God."

So they may think, we're not interested in what Luke is showing us, but why are they then competing with God in God's own business? Can that be true? Folks who don't believe in God nevertheless competing with God in the Father's business? Wait a minute!

First a little story. Fred Niedner, prof at Valparaiso University, once teased an audience by saying: "Guess what, sex is NOT the most powerful human drive. What then is? The drive to

be right. And if you don't believe that, just get married."

The drive to be right, to demonstrate, prove, that I'm not wrong. Not just in moral stuff, but in my opinions, in my overall life.

And that's where we bump up against the Father's business. As COMPETITORS. Running our own make-myself-right business.

Not only does Jesus' Father say, "Hey, kids, that's MY business," but with a tearful eye: "You'll never make it running your own business on this one. You're doomed from the git-go."

DIAGNOSIS:

COMPETING with God in the Father's business is a three-step tragedy.

1. We all do it, but never get done with it. You may think you proved that you were right today in all your actions and relationships, but tomorrow you'll have to do it again.
2. The compulsion to do that is itself the sickness. Not trusting God to do God's business. Frank Sinatra's feisty claim "I'll do it my way" in getting yourself right, making yourself OK is already a statement of unfaith. "God, I don't trust that you will make me right YOUR way."
3. To try to take over the Father's business is not only stupid, it's impossible. It's finally lethal. Like trying to do your own heart operation. Self-surgery is suicide.

PROGNOSIS

Jesus SETS UP THE FATHER'S BUSINESS HERE ON EARTH, & invites us to move from being COMPETITOR in the Father's business, to being a CUSTOMER, and then (wow!) COLLABORATOR.

4. First the Father and the Son set up his business on earth. The Forgiveness business. Founding day is Christmas. Shop open for business—full business set up by Easter and Pentecost. Yes, there is Good Friday that same Easter weekend when we see the nitty-gritty of what ALL it takes to get sinners forgiven, to get God's lost kids brought back home. There's a little three-letter Greek word here—D — E — I—translated "must" in the "must be about my father's business." It pops up more often in Luke than in any other gospel. This is not the must of compulsion or coercion, but the must of dedication and commitment. "In order to get the job done, this is what I 'must' do—all the way to Good Friday to get the forgiveness business going here on earth." The Father too "must" make a big investment, investing the best he has. His own dear child, joined to Mary's human child—divine DNA and our human DNA all in one package—true God & true man. Here "true" doesn't simply mean he REALLY was God, he REALLY was a human, but he TRULY is the Father's SON, TRULY doing the Father's business, TRULY one of us to get us into the shop of his father's business.
5. He invites us to be CUSTOMERS of the Father's business. It's a two-step. Repentance and getting your sins forgiven. 'Fessing up to being lost and then coming back home with Jesus showing the way. Better still, Jesus BEING the Way. REPENTANCE doesn't mean breast-beating, but turning around. Stop being COMPETITOR and start being CUSTOMER. CUSTOMER means coming to the shop to get the goodies. And since the Son has already put down his life for the cost of forgiveness, the goods are handed out free. "Sola gratia" in church lingo. On the house. "Young man, you'll be glad to hear this: Your sins are forgiven." Come back home. The Father is waiting. There's a place set for you at the table.

6. COLLABORATOR, PARTNER.

And as if that weren't good enough, he adds the year-end bonus. Come join the business as a Partner, Collaborator. Now that you're enjoying the goodies, get into distribution. Luke's words at the end of his gospel, that mission mandate from Jesus, might be rendered: "Keep the business going, starting in Jerusalem, or St. Louis, and move on out to the ends of the world. You are my field representatives. I am sending you." It's SUCH A DEAL! It's the forgiveness business, "my Father's business." When we lost kids come home and get brought into the business it is no longer just Jesus' Father's business, but OUR Father's business.

Summa, But it's not all peaches and cream. At least on two angles.

Angle ONE. We keep backsliding into the COMPETITOR posture. Every day for me. Just ask Marie when the last time was that I tried to show her that I was right! Or the last time you did the same with spouse, sibling, parent, friend—or even enemy?

We're chronic competitors and need daily turn-around. But that option is now wide open. It's the Father's business. The invitation to turn from Competitor to Customer is the daily "special" in the Father's business.

Angle TWO. Besides ourselves backsliding into competition, our American culture offers a number of competitors to Jesus' Father and his Father's business. One that has come upon us this Christmas time is the blockbuster movie AVATAR. A New York Times reviewer this week said:

It's fitting that James Cameron's "Avatar" arrived in theaters at Christmastime. Like the holiday season itself, the science fiction epic is a crass embodiment of capitalistic excess

wrapped around a deeply felt religious message. It's at once the blockbuster to end all blockbusters, and the "Gospel According to James." But not the Christian Gospel. Instead, "Avatar" is Cameron's long apologia for pantheism—a faith that equates God with Nature, & calls humanity into religious communion with the natural world.

Pantheism offers a different sort of solution: a downward exit, an abandonment of our tragic self-consciousness, a re-merger with the natural world our ancestors half-escaped millennia ago.

But except as dust and ashes, Nature cannot take us back. [Such deep theology in the NYT!]

That IS one way to “get back home.” It’s not just this movie. We are bombarded by such offers—day in, day out— in our American way of life. They offer ways to get right, to get back home. But it comes under another “name.” A distinctively different name brand. Check them out and see if when all is said in done, dust and ashes is not their way to get back home.

The forgiveness business going on “in Jesus’ name” is REALLY different. It genuinely IS the Father’s business. The others aren’t. They’re pretend competitors. Jesus—now running his Father’s business worldwide—offers a better way, and a better home to get back to. It’s dust and ashes vs. life that lasts. So come to THIS store to do your business—to get right, to get home.

Is Luther's Way of Thinking Missional?

Robert Kolb

Readers are asked to excuse the not-quite-polished nature of the essay and notes

Martin Luther stood at a point in church history at which he was called to translate the biblical message anew into a different cultural situation than its long-time Mediterranean idiom. That task had vital importance for him because he was convinced that the proclamation of that message brings individuals to the trust in Jesus Christ, and that trust gives life. Luther's experiments in translating his understanding of the biblical message into the central, northern, European setting of his day provide some raw material for constructing elements of a twenty-first century missiology.

In trying to assess how we proceed to give witness to our faith in our settings and situations, it may be worthwhile to look to such a conversation partner who stands outside the stresses and strains of our own circumstances.. Engaging such a person should not be seen as a shortcut to thinking through our own problems, as prescriptive or directive, a substitute for our own intellectual sweat and muscle. Luther can do no more than stimulate and fire our imaginations and give us vantage points from which to view both the biblical message and the world around us. In this way his thinking can aid us in shaping our testimony to God's love for his human creatures.

In turning to conversation partners from the church's past, we

must be careful not to expect too much from them – although we are probably tempted to expect too little from them. But it is part of God's design for humanity that we are historical beings. Being created in his image means, among many other mysteries, that we reflect something of the wonderful variety which apparently belongs to the nature of God even if human beings also have something of his ultimate simplicity. That means that people in North America differ from people in Europe, and when we introduce the time factor, the differences between Luther's hearers and readers in his own day and us are many.

Nonetheless, Luther had the gift of a penetrating vision both of the temper of his day and of the insights offered by biblical writers into the human condition and the kind of God God is. These insights could stimulate our thinking on several aspects of what we mean by "missional," but I wish to concentrate today on some factors in his way of addressing God's Word to his people that may help us in thinking through the task of our individual, evangelistic, witnessing to the gift of life and integrity God gives us in Christ. For Luther had his own way of addressing the question, **"What's a person to do, to say, when encountering someone who is living apart from Christ?"**

The first question that Luther might pose when addressing this enterprise might well be: **"Who cares?"** The "who" is the center of the question, for Luther's understanding of reality is intensely personal. Those who grow up in Christian cultures presume that the Ultimate and Absolute reality is a person, but increasingly today people around us think in terms of the Ultimate and Absolute in other forms: multiple semi-personal centers and sources of power and order for their lives, or a single, ultimate spirit that radiates through what we experience and perceive, penetrating our beings when we do not resist, or perhaps even when we do. Others assign as much power as there is to human agencies, often supra-personal, such as race or party

or class, but often to themselves or to another individual.

From Scripture Luther knew that God is a person, a person who takes on personal form as he speaks, who through his speaking creates community, that is, relationships between himself and his creatures and relationships among his creatures. Luther defined reality in terms of what God says.

That Luther had learned from his Ockhamistic instructors, who emphasized that God holds total power to order and to preserve that order. Luther moved to place that power in God's mouth. He created the worlds by speaking. In lecturing on Genesis 1, Luther stated,

"The words 'Let there be light' are the words of God . . . this means that they are realities. For God calls into existence the things which do not exist. He does not speak grammatical words. He speaks true and substantial realities. Accordingly, that which among us has the sound of a word is a reality with God."¹

He had said much the same thing three years earlier, commenting on Psalm 2 that God communicates through a

"word of reality [*verbum reale*], not just a sound, as our words are . . . That is a language different from ours. When the sun rises, when the sun sets, God is speaking. When fruit on the tree grows in size, when human beings are born, God is speaking. Accordingly, the words of God are not empty air but things very great and wonderful, which we see with our eyes and feel with our hands."

When the Creator said, "Let there be . . .," things happened. His Word fashioned the reality of all we experience.² In 1535 Luther drew the implications of this mode of God's operation for the restoration of sinners to their full humanity, centered on

faith him. Paul had referred to God's creative commands in 2 Corinthians 4:6, where, Luther continued, the apostle was reflecting the biblical conviction that God is by nature a Creator and that he creates through the Word when he converts the wicked – "something which is also brought about by the Word – as a new work of creation."³

By his very nature, as Luther saw it revealed in Christ's suffering and death in behalf of sinners, God cares. This person, who created through speaking, this God of conversation and community, has come personally as the Word made flesh to care for those who had missed the mark in fulfilling their humanity. This person, who created human beings as persons for conversation and community, has cared enough to send his very best, his Son, Jesus Christ.

In addition, Luther tells us that we as God's people care.

"Everything then should be directed in such a way that you recognize what God has done for you and you, thereafter, make it your highest priority to proclaim this publicly and call everyone to the light to which you are called. Where you see people that do not know this, you should instruct them and also teach them how you learned, that is, how a person through the good work and might of God is saved and comes from darkness into light."⁴

Luther's anthropology defined what it means to be human in a distinctive way, in two dimensions. His intensely personal view of God meant that he defined humanity, as Jesus did, in terms of two relationships: with God, who claims our central, life-orienting fear, love, and trust – above all God's creatures – and with the neighbor, for whom we are willing to sacrifice and give, on the model God gives us in his incarnation, in order to actualize his love in the lives of those around us (Matt.

22:37-40). In his proclamation Luther set out to bestow “passive righteousness,” the God-given identity as his children, which is the way he wants to view us first of all, and Luther wanted to cultivate “active righteousness,” the performance of God’s expectations, that demonstrates and concretizes our identity as God’s children, both in our praise and testimony of him and in our acts of love toward his creatures, human and all the rest of God’s happy collection of the products of his speaking reality into existence.

Therefore, caring involves bringing the life-restoring love of Christ to whole people, as we act as whole people ourselves. Our first priority in general – though not in every specific case – demands the creation and cultivation of the personal relationship of trust with our Creator, who has revealed himself in Jesus of Nazareth and who works in us as the Holy Spirit. But at the same time we are also very much concerned to bring God’s love to meet the penultimate as well as the ultimate needs of our neighbors; often the penultimate needs demand chronological priority.

We are also intent on training those whom the Holy Spirit has brought to trust God through our witness into a life of hearkening unto the Lord’s words about how to enjoy life to the fullest, trusting him and following him in demonstrating his care and concern to others. That means providing for their needs on the simplest and most personal level, and it means seeking justice and peace for others, respecting or restoring their integrity and dignity, because that is God’s expectation for truly human living.

On this basis we focus our witness on the relationship between God and the human creatures to whom he calls us to witness within the eschatological context which permeated Luther’s thought. That relationship is a relationship that lasts forever,

and so it has something to say about heaven, or at least about life everlasting. The denial of death that twists our culture, as Ernest Becker pointed out a generation ago, has not abolished death, and so the unpleasant thoughts we try to suppress take their vengeance when death finally bares its teeth in our own faces. However, on most days, for all of us, heaven can wait.

For Luther eschatology was not simply a concept about the end of earthly existence as we know it. He felt the presence of God in the midst of the everyday, and he recognized the full breadth of the biblical concept of “shalom,” the order and peace which God bestows through his Word as it intervenes in broken lives and broken communities. Therefore, the first urgency that demands our witness to Christ is the urgency of bringing the peace and joy, the taste of God’s shalom, to people in the midst of the toil, tribulation, and terrors of everyday life. There, too, God cares, and we care, and that leads to another question.

The second question Luther might pose as we consider the task of Christian witness is: **“why would any other human being be interested in our message anyway?”** For Luther realized early on, as he planned instruction for Christian living, that people who do not recognize that they are ill do not normally seek a cure. Luther’s practice of the distinction of law and gospel structures this diagnosis of dilemma and conveying of cure. It enables us to analyze and prepare for our witness more effectively. It is a logical observation that insists that law in Luther’s technical sense of the word must precede gospel. This ordering of our witness is not always psychologically or theologically appropriate, however, and presentation of God’s Word to those outside the faith is somewhat more complicated than that simple dictum, but the general rule is good to remember. At best, when we give information about Jesus to people whose false gods are still functioning fairly effectively, we cannot expect to do more than add him to their

pantheon.

Regarding evil Luther first counsels that the heart of the problem lies with the human failure to place God at the center of our thinking and living: we do not fear, love, and trust in God above all things. That helps focus Christian witness precisely, on acquainting those outside the faith with their Creator and Redeemer. Luther defined humanity around the focal point created by the human creature's trust in someone or something as the absolute and ultimate source of all good and the safe place of refuge in every distress (LC, Cr, 2-3). These objects of trust function as substitutes for God; they are false gods.

By this definition all people have more than one god – over time for sure, and most often simultaneously. All sinners have more than one substitute for their Creator since no single creature can serve as a sufficient substitute for God. We are all polytheists; “we” includes Christians since the mystery of the continuation of sin and evil in the lives of the baptized means that the struggle to hold life together in an evil world continually diverts us into trusting someone or something God has made instead of him himself.

We might paraphrase Luther's “source of all good and refuge in time of distress” by speaking of God and his substitutes as the source(s) of our identity, security, and meaning or worth. For contemporary North Americans Erik Erikson has made the concept of our sense of who we are the equivalent of Luther's concept of righteousness: being the right person, the person that we are supposed to be. The need for some sense of safety or security in daily life is clear: the physiological and psychological implications of its absence are devastating, death-dealing. A sense of dignity or worth or meaningfulness in life is critical for “keeping going,” and as the historical beings God created us

to be “shalom” is to be found in moving along the paths on which he has set us. Straying from those paths may be disastrous; stopping on them deadly.

Nonetheless, in the Smalcald Articles (III.i.3) Luther points out that the doubt of God and the denial of his lordship that separates his rebellious creatures from their Creator is not something people can sense or recognize apart from “revelation in the Scriptures,” that is, apart from listening to God himself. Sinners can perceive the existence of evil, even within themselves, but they cannot comprehend its origin in their failure to fear, love, and trust the true God apart from knowing him at least a bit. Therefore, our witness to those who do not know him must begin by speaking of him and his regard for them but cannot presume that they themselves have a full perception of their own dilemma and therefore of the way out of their predicament. Because living apart from Christ is a life copied from the Deceiver, the father of lies (John 8:44), we cannot even presume that they are able to be fully honest with themselves about the misshapeness of their lives and their own involvement in misshaping it.

The second insight for assessing why others might wish to come to Christ that Luther give us is that their predicament – what is wrong with human life apart from him – has a wide variety of symptoms. One popular, but false, impression of Luther’s diagnosis of the human condition echoes Melanchthon’s observation in the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, “the law always accuses.” Luther was indeed guilt-ridden as a young monk, but he described his quandary in a host of ways. His view of what the law does to those outside the faith is better summarized in the Smalcald Articles (III.3.1-2), where he described it as a “thunderbolt” which destroys open sinners and false saints, as a hammer that breaks the rock of human security in pieces (citing Jeremiah 23:29). The law cracks and smashes,

it terrorizes and casts into despair. Luther often enough points out that the victims of evil as well as its perpetrators have good reason to be on the search for a new source of identity, security, and meaning, and that is what opens people to our witness to the love of God in Christ Jesus.

That means that conversations about whatever is plaguing and oppressing our non-Christian acquaintances can help us find an opening to talk about what Jesus means to us and thereby introduce him to them. We do not have to wait for some perception of guilt or shame to creep up on them. Such feelings are seldom at the surface of human thinking, and certainly not in contemporary North American society. Guilt feelings condemn, and threaten, and so it is natural for sinners to reposition responsibility for what goes wrong onto someone or something else's account.

But fears of illness and death, job loss and financial crisis, all shake the security systems, the false gods, of people's lives. So do tottering and collapsing relationships in the family, on the job, in the neighborhood. So does loss of dignity, worth, and meaningful activities for life. Any of these kinds of distress and defeat can set people on the search for new sources of identity, security, and meaning. When they become present in the lives of the people around us, if we have built a relationship of trust with them, we become natural conversation partners and will have opportunities to introduce them to Jesus Christ as their true Lord and Savior.

Thus, when Luther describes what Christ has done for sinners, for instance in the Large Catechism, he speaks not only of their forgiveness, but also of their liberation – redemption and release – from fear, entanglement with self-centeredness and blindness, condemnation to death. Christ tackled the troika of enemies that the ancient fathers had fought: the devil, the

world, and the sinful desires that guide our own ways of thinking about reality. These foes deceive people into focusing and ordering life in false, self-defeating ways; they alienate us from God and other people; they send us down false paths. From such captivities and addictions Christ sets his people free. He provides resources for genuine human living to those whose alternate sources for living had proved bankrupt; he aids those whose alternate sources of help have run dry; he comforts those who are despairing of their plans, their hopes, of life itself. He restores truly human life in its fullness to those on the run from their God; he is a God who raises from the dead (LC Cr, 26-30).

God cares about those who are trapped and caught in evil. **What has he done about it? How has he solved the problem?** Luther does not supply a definitive explanation that delivers mastery of God's actions into our hands. Gustaf Aulén's valuable study of atonement theory in the history of the church, *Christus Victor*, argued that Luther departed from the "Anselmian" model of the medieval church to which his followers returned, and taught instead, as had ancient theologians, that Christ atones for sinners by defeating their enemies, conquering them through his resurrection.⁵ Ian Siggins offers a more accurate assessment of Luther's atonement thinking when he asserts that Luther had no atonement theory – in the sense of that kind of explanation that claims to plumb the depths of God's mind – and instead offered his hearers and readers an abundance of images and descriptions of what God has done to accomplish the liberation of his people from sin, death, Satan, God's wrath, and the crushing and condemnation of the law.⁶

As we address the perceived cracks in our conversation partner's way of holding life together, we may have to challenge presuppositions that place his or her experience in a false context, to which a proper answer cannot be given. This task

obviously requires patience, sympathy and understanding, as well as an appropriate and plausible glimpse of the content of God's revelation of himself and his will for his chosen people in Christ.

Among Luther's many ways of driving Christ into the lives of his hearers and readers and changing their way of thinking (for that is what repentance is) and thereby their orientation to life, particularly important was his application of baptism to the ongoing struggle against their own defiance of God and denial of his lordship for the faithful because they continue to experience sin and evil in their lives. "The old creature in us with all sins and evil desires is to be drowned and die through daily contrition and repentance, and on the other hand, a new person is to come forth and rise up to live before God in righteousness and purity forever," he wrote in the *Small Catechism* in explaining the ongoing significance of the sacrament.⁷

Jonathan Trigg argues that Luther's understanding of justification by faith is "predicated upon" his understanding of God's baptismal action as his re-creative Word, which restores the proper relationship between God and his human creature.⁸ Luther believed that the only way out of the tragic dilemma of human revolt against God and alienation from him is to end the self-forged identity as people who center lives in some creatures or others. For the payoff for this sin is death, and only death. Sinners must die, eternally or baptismally. When Christ shares with them his death and thus buries all that is wrong with their lives in his tomb, he then gives them the gift of eternal life by sharing his resurrection with them.

Thus, when we encounter those who "wish I were dead," with some degree of seriousness, we stand ready to say to them, "Do I have a deal for you!" For only God can change the past. He can lay

our old identities in Christ's tomb, into which he never looks, and he can help refocus our attention away from the haunting memories of our old identities. In the mystery of Christ's claiming us as his own and sharing his death and resurrection with us, he re-creates the very person we are, even when the battle against old ways of trying to accomplish a worthwhile life continues.

This motif of justification by re-creation is, of course, only one of many ways Luther used to describe what Christ has done for us. When he used this motif, he was generally declaring the facts regarding the reality which God accomplishes through his word of forgiveness. When he focused on those who were preoccupied with the signs of their own sinfulness, he proclaimed away their guilt or shame by speaking of God's imputation, picking up a relatively seldom used word in order to emphasize that God reckons or regards those who are battling the evil within themselves as his people, righteous in their identity because he judges them to be.

No legal fiction, God's judgment creates reality. Luther could speak of Christ's reconciliation to those who felt they had wandered far from their God. He could depict the gentleness and tenderness of parental love to those who felt fearful and alone, unlovable and unloved. His imagination moved out from biblical descriptions and metaphors of what God has done in Christ Jesus to similar expressions gleaned from his own situation in late medieval Germany. He models for us an agility of articulation of God's promise of new life in Christ.

What is it that God wants to accomplish through the death and resurrection of Christ? Christ came that his human creatures might have life and have it more abundantly (John 10:10). John wrote his gospel so that those who were trusting in false gods could come to know Jesus as Messiah and that by trusting in him

they might have life in his name (John 20:31). Life comes by believing, Luther came to see, and he did not define believing as mere acknowledgement of a set of facts. Believing, trusting, forms the heart and basis of true human living for Luther, and so his preaching and teaching aimed at making people wise in truly human living – salvation – which, he was convinced, would cause them to mature in the practice of the activities he had designed them to carry out in his world.

“Trust” and “believe” are not words that can stand alone. They take on meaning only when linked to an object, and they are words that necessarily describe a relationship when that object is a person. God is a God of conversation and community, and so the goal of his sending Christ into the world to save sinners is the restoration of the conversation he designed us to have in communion with him. Heidelberg systematician Wilfried Härle, examining Luther’s disputation on justification of 1535, argues that the reformer’s doctrine of justification by faith reflected the Old Testament concept of what both God and human creature are – are supposed to be –, centering in “communal faithfulness” [Gemeinschaftstreue, *Gemeinschaftstreue*].⁹ Therefore, bringing the gospel to those outside that community, who are living without that faithfulness to their Creator, involves the restoration of that communal faithfulness.

In this disputation Luther repeated his long-time insistence that saving faith is not merely “historic faith,” the acknowledgement of the facts of Jesus’ story. “It grasps Christ, who died for our sins and arose again for our justification,” (Rom. 4:25) and “understands the love of God the Father, who wants to redeem and save you through Christ.” It “joyfully embraces the Son of God given for it with arms outstretched joyfully, saying, ‘He is my beloved, and I am his.’” It recognizes that Christ died and rose “for me.” Good works flow from this faith, not under compulsion but voluntarily, as a good

tree naturally and freely produces good fruits (Matt. 10.)7:16

The Holy Spirit creates and preserves this trust in the same way God has created and preserves the rest of reality, through his Word, and indeed, his Word in a specific form. He enters into conversation with us in order to pledge to give us life, and thereby to restore us to truly human living. Luther came to recognize that God spoke his words of re-creation and life in the form of a promise. At the foot of the cross the reformer discovered the presence and power of the God who had earlier seemed to him to be absent and angry. He discovered God's wisdom and power in what he had formerly thought to be foolishness and impotence and therefore signs of God's anger and absence (1 Cor. 1:18-2:16).

Instead, God was very much there on the cross, on his way to and through the tomb into new life, and from the cross and tomb he spoke the promise that he would return to our lives as our Lord and that he would restore the humanity we had damaged and tried to discard.

The nature of God's address to sinners in the form of a promise in the midst of the continuing presence of sin and evil meant for Luther first of all that the proofs he had sought in signs and logic as a scholastic theologian lost their significance. They had repeatedly revealed themselves as inadequate and deceptive anyway. Luther did maintain high respect for God's gift of reasoning, and as an Ockhamist he firstly believed in exercising dominion by empirical examination of God's world. But he also recognized that empirical and logical learning both place what is being studied under the control of the one who is learning. The parameters for definition and for searching out meaning from something are set by the one who is learning or by a teacher.

Promises are different. The receiver of a promise is dependent on the one who gives the promise. The receiver does not control the learning; the giver does. If God is to remain God, he cannot submit himself to human testing and proving. He communicates with us in the form of commands, which put burdens on us, light as his yoke may be to those who follow the commands with the power of the Holy Spirit, and in the form of promise, which puts the burden on him.

Promises evoke trust. Just how trust arises is something of a mystery. It is akin to love. Poets can describe falling in love, and they do better at the task than psychologists. Psychologists recognize the importance of trust for human life, for human peace of mind. Whatever one may think of Erik Erikson's attempt to do analysis across the centuries in *Young Man Luther*, his repetition of Luther's insight into the heart of what it means to be human, trust, is a very helpful beachhead for talking of the gospel in North American culture today. Erikson perceived that trust is the fundamental building-block of human personhood and personality and that learning to trust more or to mistrust more in the first two years of life determines much of how a person lives, the quality of our lives, for the rest of our days.

Luther also viewed faith in God as the fundamental constitutive element of our humanity. To live by faith for meant to have all of life oriented toward and empowered by the object of trust, the source of good and refuge, of identity, security, and meaning. "To have a god is nothing else than to trust and believe in that [source of good and refuge in distress] with your whole heart." "To have a God, does not mean to grasp him with your fingers, or to put him into a purse, or to shut him up in a box. Rather you lay hold of God when your heart grasps him and clings to him. To cling to him with your heart is nothing else than to entrust yourself to him completely. He wishes to

turn us away from everything else apart from him and to draw us to himself because he is the one, eternal good" (LC, TC, 2, 13-15).

He draws us to himself by talking to us. "Faith is nothing else than believing what God promises and reveals. . . . The Word and faith are both necessary, and without the Word there can be no faith."¹¹ Luther told his students that as a mother might say, "Darling baby, my dear little mouse," so God comes to us in our tears to reassure us, and in trust we react with joy. For living by faith means trusting God's Word. "Faith judges according to the Word and by the Word and faith perceives a profoundly paternal love and thoroughly maternal caresses."¹² This trust is what God wants our witness to Jesus to create.

But – **"how shall they come to trust him?" "How does God deliver his gospel?"** Luther's understanding of the Word of God as his instrument for creating reality, also in the midst of the chaos and rejection of shalom, the chasing after false gods, that constitutes our sinfulness, forms a very important part of what we have to offer to twenty-first century missiology. Luther's Ockhamist framework for reading Scripture combined with his exegetical calling to immerse him deeply in the Bible and to catch there the presupposition of the biblical writers that God creates through his Word in some mysterious fashion which they report but do not analyze. Luther had experienced the power of the gospel's proclamation to him as it arose from the printed page as well as – and above all – from absolution, from preaching, from the Word in baptismal form, from the Supper of the Lord, and from conversation with other Christians. He spoke from personal encounters with God's presence and power as he heard and read, recalled and feasted upon God's gift of his own love in Christ that he had received new life from the forgiveness and reconciliation that God's speaking to him bestowed.

Luther believed firmly that the gospel gives “the resources and aids” [Rat und Hulf] to combat sin and live the life of trust in God through various forms of his Word (SA III.v). But he did not attempt to explain precisely how the Holy Spirit exercises the power to re-create sinners into trusting children of God through the various forms of the Word. On the one hand, this gospel power rests in God’s commitment, his promise and pledge, that he will be faithful, even when we are not – since that is his very nature: “he cannot deny himself” (2 Tim. 2:13). To have someone tell us that he or she will be with us through thick and thin, no matter what, is always encouraging though sometimes not totally believable. To have God tell us that does evoke a reaction, sometimes of doubt, but sometimes of wonder, awe, gratitude, and the confidence and dependence that define trust.

But the trust that the Holy Spirit creates through our witness does involve human “action,” though not one that we can explain by normal decision-making processes. I can decide to kill or not to kill, even to hate or not to hate, but I cannot force myself to trust you, and you cannot coerce trust in yourself out of me either. Trust takes place in a way, as we said, that remains mysterious. And so, we will never fathom or explain the power of the Holy Spirit’s creating the trust that is the human side of the relationship God establishes through his promise. But we can observe enough about the psychological side of trust to sharpen our ability to help people to learn of Christ, to listen appropriately to his approach to them, and to place their confidence in him.

Luther models for us how we should keep in tension God’s total responsibility for our salvation and at the same time affirm the full responsibility of the human being to be about the psychological acts of fearing, loving, and trusting in God. Most Christian thinkers have tried to homogenize and harmonize God’s grace and human efforts and have used a number of devices to do

that. Luther and Melanchthon tried to hold the two in tension, sometimes more successfully, sometimes less. That means that, to put the problem in law and gospel language, the law demands human actions – that is, it describes what happens on the human side according to God’s design – and the gospel conveys God’s action, as mysterious in re-creation as it remains in creation, not only describing but effecting his saving will for us. And you cannot have the one without the other, at least as a general rule.

In thinking about God’s restoring the fullness of our humanity through his Word, we dare not forget that Luther emphasized that God is rich in his grace and therefore gives his life- restoring Word to us in so many different forms, as the peasant told the priest when he priest thought absolution should be enough gospel and the peasant need not worry about going to the Lord’s Supper – in Luther’s *Short Order of Confession* (1529).¹³ In the Smalcald Articles Luther lists five – what he occasionally called (and his followers made into a dogmatic category) – “means of grace,” preaching, baptism, the Lord’s Supper, absolution, and, absolution in its broader form, the mutual conversation and consolation of Christians with one another.

A student recently surprised me by observing that for post-modern times the sacraments were probably the most effective forms of the Word to use in conversing with those outside the faith. I pointed out to him that he was wrong: where I came from, when you were converting people to Lutheranism, and they were generally the newly-married Methodist or Baptist spouses of long-time members of the congregation, you tried to avoid the embarrassing subject of the sacraments for as long as possible. He pointed out that I was wrong: God’s speaking in his sacraments is no problem for post-moderns, who presume that, if he is going to talk, he can use media, and that God’s gift of a new identity, a new birth, a death and resurrection in baptism,

as well as his gift of sustenance for days of toil and trouble in the Lord's Supper, concretize and materialize the promise of new life in very meaningful ways.

Though he laid out no evangelistic theory, Luther's view of human interaction reminds us that we deliver God's Word as whole people, not just with our "religious" thoughts and actions. Trust in God may be very difficult psychologically for those who find few if any human beings to trust. Therefore, when we come with God's Word, we may have to wait patiently for sufficient trust to be built in our conversation partner to enable a hearing of our witness.

In connection with our assessment of how best to echo God's promise into the lives of others, we dare not forget that Luther's doctrine of creation directs our evangelistic strategy with the entire person in view, taking seriously every aspect of the whole human being whom we are engaging. His doctrine of creation also takes away any spiritualizing fear of academic study and disciplined research into how human communication, human thinking, and human community function. This larger view of what it means to be human and of the blessings of the academic disciplines flourished in Wittenberg, a university that in Luther's lifetime promoted the study of botany and astronomy, of Latin poetry and world history, and his colleague Melanchthon made contributions to the study and teaching of rhetoric and logic that kept his textbooks on those subjects in print for two hundred years. These two colleagues actively encouraged student use of rhetoric and dialectic skills in interpreting and communicating the promise of Christ.

Luther's understanding of the goodness of creation also directs us toward a healthy appreciation of God's gifts within specific cultures while at the same time not freeing us from the obligation to exercise godly criticism of our societies when

they are defying God's plan and rule for their people and subjecting them to injustice and abuse. Luther's distinction of the two realms also permits us to distinguish the positive contributions to life in this world of those who still are not enjoying the fullness of their humanity by placing their ultimate trust in some creature rather than their Creator. At the same time, within this distinction we recognize the challenge to our witness imposed by the intermeshing of the two realms, and we are sensitive to the fact that some things we regard as religiously neutral and restricted to the horizontal realm in our own thinking may indeed have religious significance to those with whom we are conversing. Luther's insights into the nature of Christian freedom concentrates our attention on liberating people from their enemies and oppressors, from Satan and sin to death and the condemnation of God's law and on the gospel's liberating them for service to others, but his understanding of our freedom also means that we are not bound to particular cultural forms or expressions of the faith. Those whom we draw to Christ may indeed find different ways of expressing our common faith within their own context of experience and upbringing.

Is Luther's way of thinking missional? In more ways than we have reviewed here, I am sure. In so far as his way of thinking can be designated a "theology of God's Word," this way of thinking has a dynamic that simply cannot be anything but sending us, Christ's people, into the lives of others to proclaim repentance and the forgiveness of sins. The Wittenberg way of understanding who God is and what it means to be human impels us into conversation, conversation with our God and conversation that delivers God's reality-creating promise of his presence and power, the power of God that saves, that gives life and peace and joy in Christ.

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3 “Genesis Lectures,” 1535-1545, LW 1:16-17; WA 42:13,31-14,22.

4 WA12:318,25-318,6, as translated in Stolle, *Church Comes from All Nations*, 20.

5 Gustaf Aulén, *Christus Victor, An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of the Atonement*, trans. A. G. Hebert (1931; New York: Macmillan, 1961).

6 Ian A. K. Siggins, *Martin Luther's Doctrine of Christ* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), 108-113.

7 BOOK OF CONCORD, the confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church/ ed. Robert Kolb, Timothy J. Wengert. MP 2000, 360, BSLK 516, 29-517,7.

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10 WA39,1:45,11-46,10, LW34:109-11.

11 “Proceedings at Augsburg,” 1518, LW 31:270-271; WA 2:13,18-22.

12 “Lectures on Isaiah,” 1527-1530, LW 17:410; WA 31,2: 580,14-18.

13 WA 31,1:345,9-12, LW 53:118.

[Is_Luthers_Thinking_Missional \(PDF\)](#)

Alfa Papa, Bravo Tango, but Charlie Victor: Which Is to Say, The Proper Distinguishing of Law and Gospel Saves the Church (C) from the Two Oldest Heresies (A and B). A Gambit. 1

1 Gambit: "A remark made to open or redirect a conversation."

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1. Everywhere we look we see the church—supposedly one, holy, catholic, and apostolic—divided and dividing. “Two roads diverged” and we took them both, time after time. Now there are tens of thousands of denominations, most of them of more than one mind.

2. Yet we say all the time that the church is the body of Christ. Has Christ been partitioned when we weren’t looking? We collaborate with a few, we converse with some, we anathematize others, we ignore the rest. Wouldn’t Paul criticize that as a failure to discern the body (1 Corinthians 11:29)? Is there more

than one baptism, Lord, cup, faith? I don't think so!

3. The purpose of this paper is to suggest a logic behind the splitting—a logic which has everything to do with a failure to properly distinguish law and gospel in God's Word. Thus, the central concern of the Lutheran theological tradition and of the Crossings Community has ramifications for understanding the fractured state of the church.

4. The Hatfields and McCoys of today's church are not eastern and western Christianity, or Roman Catholics and Protestants, but so-called and self-styled liberal and conservative Christianity; ecumenicals and evangelicals. We just plain don't like each other. That opposition is evident not only in worldwide associations (World Council of Churches vs. World Evangelical Fellowship— even if a few belong to both!) but within denominations (even the Roman Catholics), and within congregations.

5. What divides the body of Christ? What causes schism? Division of the church arises from the exercise of our will, whenever we mold the Gospel and the church into what we *prefer* instead of what God *proffers*. The word "heresy" is from the Greek for "choosing" or "opting." To be a heretic is to pick—as though from a menu—what we prefer.

6. Two chief and natural heresies are available to people who wish to organize or improve the church and its teaching according to their preference. Paul distinguishes these two in operation among the Corinthians almost as soon as the church had been launched. I think they continue today.

7. In 1 Corinthians, he defends the Gospel-shaped church against two aberrations:

a. He sees what they want: "*For [some] demand „signs“ and*

[others] desire "wisdom."

b. Then he reminds the congregation what he had passed on to them: *"but we proclaim Christ crucified."*

c. Then he expresses some sympathy with them. He can see why each group has a problem with what he taught them. To those who think in terms of power (evident in powerful signs—Paul uses these two words interchangeably), the Gospel seems to be *"a stumbling block."* To those more into wisdom to start with, the Gospel must seem like *"foolishness."*

d. Concluding, Paul points out that they have not improved the Gospel by adapting it. **The true gospel is better than what they are making out of it by adapting it to their preferences:** The gospel is, *"to those who are called, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God."* (1 Corinthians 1:22)

8. Those two parties are alive and well.

a. Some people still want to make of the Gospel something more definite, decisive, and powerful. They want people to know exactly what they should believe and obey. They would prefer that outsiders see how strict their moral teachings are, and how correct their worship. Their confidence in the Gospel comes from the strength of what is revealed, and the *strength* with which it is followed.

b. Opposed to them are those who want the Gospel to make more sense to them and others. They think they know wisdom when they see it, and they want the teaching of the church to square with what they already know, in their wisdom. I think this is what Paul means by *"plausible words of wisdom,"* in 1 Cor. 2:4. For example, they might want everyone to be able to see how well they get along with each other, how generous they are, how relevant is this faith.

9. *Power and might vs. wisdom and understanding.* This antinomy

is essential to understanding the human. Both strength and wisdom are gifts humanity has received from God, but they have a habit of being pitted against each other. Brains or brawn. The pen versus the sword.

10. And when the desire for God to *appear to act according to our expectations* becomes the decisive principle in the church's life, the ensuing conflict will separate people whose expectations are dissimilar. For "My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are my ways your ways," says the Lord.

11. Indeed, the Bible does reveal God to be one who detests our sin. We were made in God's image, and God still wants us to reflect him perfectly. The standards are high and unyielding, whether you open up the full implications of the Ten Commandments or unfold what it means to love with God's type of love. And the consequences of failing to live up to God's law are dire.

12. However, the Bible also reveals that God's love is not withheld from even the most vile sinners. The forgiveness of sinners is not a divine attribute which may be derived from the other picture of God—the one who detests not only what we do, but the hearts which impel us to sin. Consequently, the Bible's revelation of God appears to be inconsistent. No wonder people are tempted to take part of the picture and run with it.

13. God's Law and God's Gospel meet in Jesus Christ's crucifixion for our sin, not by averaging out two extreme messages, not by taking the corners off, but by God's liberating us (Gospel) from the judgment we have earned (Law).

14. For the sake of the Gospel, and for the unity of the church, it might be good for us to analyze our situation the way Paul broke his down.

15. Let us label the party of the “sign-demanders” **Alfa Church**, and the party of the “wisdom-desirers” **Bravo Church**. These are not actually churches. They are ideal types of church to which some wish the church would conform, and which many denominations and congregations actually resemble. T

16. Alfa Church attempts to fortify the Gospel of Christ crucified; at least, it emphasizes what is tough in the message. Bravo Church operates with a mutation of the gospel which seems *wiser*, in their eyes. Both deviate from the message about Christ crucified as if it were not quite adequate.

17. But Paul says the message of the cross is actually “just right.” The very thing people were looking for when they wandered away from the Gospel in either direction (wisdom, strength) was actually there all along, since “God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength.”

18. Let’s call church formed according to the gospel of Christ crucified **Charlie Church**. This is not a third *option*; at least, not according to Paul. Charlie is not something we design. Instead, it is the gift of the God who is both almighty *and* merciful. Charlie Church is “an echo, not a choice.”

19. Alfa, Bravo, and Charlie Church are, by the grace of God, one in Christ. Three churches do not exist, else would Christ be divided, which has not happened. We separate them hypothetically, for discussion.

20. When God’s people allow what we want to become more important than the Gospel, we organize ourselves into parties (or denominations). That way, we give the impression of living without each other. We might *feel* more together flocking with birds of a feather; but to the world the church looks ever more split. People even mistake our denominations for “different

religions”!

21. Alfa Church and Bravo Church represent human initiatives in opposite directions, each seeking to improve or reform the church.

22. Both parties appear to draw the church into the Bible. They ask us to take *certain* texts more seriously. But they point to different verses. The omnipotence of God (an Alfa theme) and the compassion of God (Bravo theme) are both in the Bible. God’s demands (Alfa) and his gifts (Bravo) are well documented. But it is not easy to see how those messages get along. The Word of God is not so homogeneous that either party will be happy with everything they read in the Bible. Consequently, by de-emphasizing each other’s themes, they seem to each other to disrespect the Bible.

23. Many features of Alfa Church and Bravo Church may be traced back to their fundamental preference for “strength” or “wisdom.” In what follows, we will point out a few of those characteristics. The presence of one “Alfa” or “Bravo” characteristic seems like a good predictor of the presence of another. Eventually, I think, the evidence will support our theory of their being two fundamentally aberrant ways of being church. The generalizations we make in support of this theory are broad, but I hope they may shed useful light on the problem of church divided.

24. Alfa and Bravo define themselves by their difference from each other. Charlie, on the other hand, defines itself with reference to the Gospel, and distinguishes itself from the world. (See, for example, AC VII: “The church”

25. Let me reiterate, for the sake of people who are right away identifying themselves with Charlie—as I do. No one is able “of their own reason or strength” to prefer Charlie. That is the

work of the Holy Spirit.

26. Alfa purports to be stronger than Bravo, attaching its self-image to that of the *Almighty* God, who has reminded us he is in charge by means of mighty signs and remarkable revelations. Bravo purports to be wiser than Alfa, identifying with the wisdom of the *Merciful* Father in heaven. (N.B.: In both and Alfa and Bravo churches, the meaning of various terms begins to assimilate to their characteristic emphases. For example, in Bravo church mercy is part of wisdom.)

27. Alfa is more authoritarian: concerned about beginnings, sources, revelation, the fact that the Bible is the *Word of God*. Note the root “author” in “authority.” Bravo, on the other hand, is more outcome-oriented, looking for certain kinds of results from the Word, using the Word to *achieve* its desiderata.

28. Mnemonically: Allusion to “alpha male” is intentional, but no reference is intended to the Alpha program of theological education. (And please note that the international radio alphabet spells it with an *f*.) “Bravo” hints at a tendency to praise the human self. If you find *chi rho* in “Charlie,” that is good.

29. Alfa focuses on the commandments God gives. Bravo focuses on the results, the *telos* God is accomplishing, e.g., life, peace. Charlie focuses on the gift God gives.

30. Alfa is to “law and order” as Bravo is to “peace and justice.”

31. Alfa prides itself on being firm about the law of God. Bravo claims to get the Gospel better. But both improperly distinguish law from gospel! In practice, both tend towards legalism. Their disagreement is between what I call elementary and advanced legalism. Hard, prickly, negative law—“Thou shalt not”—and warm,

fuzzy, “positive” law—“Love one another.”

32. Those familiar with the six-step Crossings-style exegetical model might notice that Alfa legalism crosses from step one to step six Bravo crosses from step two to step five, and considers itself wiser for doing so. Neither Alfa nor Bravo succeeds in getting down to step three; therefore neither really appropriates the power in step four—the cross of Christ. On that third level, operational power is no longer within us (as legalism requires) but is God’s own mercy.

33. Even allowing that all do profess Trinitarian faith, Alfa favors the *Father*, Bravo the *Holy Spirit*. Charlie is Christ-centered. But this is not merely a function of talking a lot about Jesus Christ. It depends on the way in which Christ is used— his death for our sins, reconciling us to the Father and giving us life.

34. For this reason, we may call Alfa Church *theocentric*, having only a vestigial Christ and Holy Spirit. Alfa Church talks and talks about “God.” In contrast, Bravo Church is *anthropocentric*, easily confusing the Holy Spirit with its own wishes. God “resident in us” is the topic of Bravo. Charlie Church is unashamedly *christocentric*, which by the way is what makes it Trinitarian.

35. Alfa Church would say it is a religion; Bravo Church a spirituality; Charlie Church a faith.

36. Alfa’s image of God is of one who is *transcendent*, majestic and mighty. Bravo prefers God *immanent*: that still, small voice that is peaceable and enlightens us from within. Charlie says both are right. However, it does not average them into a happy medium, but its eye is on the Crucified One.

37. Alfa thrills to the *Te Deum* and loves the chorus of "How Great Thou Art." Bravo would rather sing *Ubi Caritas* to candlelight, but does like the first stanza of "How Great Thou Art": "When through the woods, and forest glades I wander." Charlie sings the whole thesaurus of hymnody, but does not omit (like one collection of popular hymns) stanza three from "How Great Thou Art": "But when I think that God, his Son not sparing, sent him to die, I scarce can take it in."

38. Alfa's Bible defines what we must think and do, and backs its demands with lots of death threats, etc. Bravo finds interesting and inspiring truths in the Good Book, here and there, although some parts offend, such as when God is really mean to people. Charlie considers the Bible the cradle of Christ, and offers the whole book due reverence on that account. (Those "God is mean" parts help us take seriously why Christ had to die for us.)

39. Alfa says worship is what we owe God, a duty laid down in Scripture. Bravo wants worship to produce results in our hearts, such as peace and happiness. Charlie says yes (a duty), yes (results!)-yet it is all about the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

40. Alfa preachers emphasize authority, and use *deductive* reasoning to elaborate what God demands of us. Bravo preachers try to inspire us to do more and try harder to make the world the way it should be, employing a lot of *inductive* reasoning to get there. Charlie preaches faith in Christ (which is what God wants from us, and also what will save the world from what is wrong); you might call its thinking *correlational*.

41. Alfa teaches *deontological* ethics-what we have to do because God says so. Bravo teaches *teleological* ethics-what God is trying to achieve in the world. Charlie teaches the Lord's Prayer ethos: Jesus has told us to believe that God will

accomplish his will in the world, which will no doubt mean we will be taken care of. The Lord's Prayer merges deontology with teleology without harping on ethics, and meanwhile both comforts us and draws us into the action.

42. Alfa and Bravo Church, being shaped by predilections, make the Gospel conform to a preconceived notion of what it *ought* to sound like. And they emphasize how the church *ought* to look. No wonder Alfa and Bravo employ theologies of glory! Charlie's theology is theology of the cross, which "calls a thing not what it seems to be but what it is." (Heidelberg Disputation)

43. Charlie is not shaped according to a third sort of human preference. There are not, in Paul's thinking, some paradoxical types who prefer a Christ crucified. This is not what some of us want, but it is what all of us get! Each of us is probably more drawn to Alfa or Bravo at different times, but all of us are asked to surrender that option and accept the One God actually offers.

44. Peter said to Jesus, when he told them he would be crucified, "This must not happen!" Peter spoke for all of us. Of the twelve apostles, six were probably Alfa types (I think of Judas) and six Bravo (perhaps Thomas?). None were intrinsically, innately Charlie. Yet Charlie is what happened, by the grace of God.

45. To repeat: The proper starting point of Gospel and church is **not our predilection but God's promise**. Initially this confounds our expectations. Ultimately it satisfies them better than we could plan for, if we are willing to receive it. The church is founded on what God proffers: Jesus Christ on a cross, crucified for our sins. When the church conforms its thinking, teaching, worship, preaching, etc., to the Gospel which is about Christ crucified, it will not look like Alfa or Bravo church, yet it

will beat them at their own games.

46. Charlie Church is dialectical and correlational. It affirms the Law of God in its most trenchant form: "You shall die." Yet it has a Gospel which is adequate to the condemnation. It says "You shall live."

47. Charlie Church *gets* both the "God of Alfa" and the "God of Bravo," held in tension within its theology. It does not dismiss one in order to get a purer version of the other. It does not allow a projection of its demands/desires to become an idol.

48. Charlie Church does not dismiss half the biblical evidence; it does not drop either of God's words (law and gospel) in favor of the other. It finds the key to Scripture in the *unexpected* Gospel of Jesus Christ.

49. Charlie survives by properly distinguishing between two words from God: law and gospel. Charlie trusts God's Word to accomplish what *it sets out to do*, rather than using God's Word to accomplish what it wants to do.

50. Nevertheless, Charlie has nothing whatsoever to boast about. There is no room for boasting, according to Paul, unless you count boasting of what you have received, as Paul does. Being Charlie is always and only the work of the Holy Spirit in us, through the Gospel. Luther's Small Catechism, explanation of the third article of the Creed: "I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe . . . But the Holy Spirit has . . ."

51. The Lutheran Church occupies important ecumenical ground not (as is sometimes said) because we split the difference between the different types of churches, kind of Catholic but not too different from Baptists; not because we are moderate, or modest, or lack seriousness; not because some of our members are Alfas and some are Bravos and we manage to get along; but because we

take very seriously the humanly impossible task of dealing honestly with both of the words from God in the Bible: law and Gospel. And because in our teaching we have found not what we preferred, but what God proffers in Christ, the one who was crucified.

52. Charlie Church is not middle ground, like the middle ground Wildman and Garner find in their Alban Institute books "Lost in the Middle?" and "Found in the Middle!" It is not a separate place, for people who eschew the other two locations. It is the place where the whole church needs to be, and perhaps is, more often than we might recognize.

53. Lucky Lutherans! Whereas Alfa and Bravo both leave the task of straightening out the world and ourselves on *human shoulders* ("You should act better!" "You should feel and think differently!"), Charlie celebrates that God has taken that burden on himself in Christ, through the forgiveness of sins.

54. Lutherans, when we actually teach justification by faith using law-gospel theology, have much to offer people who err in the direction of Alfa or Bravo, because we are just like them. We, too, with our own reason or strength, prefer another sort of word. But we have seen how the Word of God clicks in Jesus Christ.

55. Lutherans (who ourselves are sometimes divided into Alfa and Bravo camps) need to take the beam out of our own eye, then help Alfa and Bravo to see what is in their respective blind spots, by showing how to properly distinguish law and gospel. For Alfa cannot manage a hearty Gospel when it is so consumed with law; and Bravo cannot quite believe that God hates sin.

56. Only in this way can the church

a. Properly make use of Christ; and

b. Offer to others the full consolation available through Christ.

57. An entire industry of Church Improvement has arisen, based upon observations that something is wrong with the church and that we can make it better either by adhering more strictly to God's demands or by being more amenable to people's wishes. Both schools of thought rely heavily upon appearances. [Heard at a recent conference: "Using other people as examples, especially positive ones, has done more in our church than anything else!"—this from a former ELCA executive, now a consultant to churches that want to vibrate more.]

Practical Application

58. I find these labels quite handy for characterizing and criticizing in broad strokes many of the efforts of well-intentioned Christians to improve the way we preach, the way every aspect of our ministry is performed, the way the church looks or wants to look to the public, etc. It is a handy way of saying that something is off kilter because of a failure to be centered in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

[Alfa_Bravo_Charlie_2010_01_28 \(PDF\)](#)