

Justification in Nickel Words

Colleagues,

For this week's Thursday Theology, we have again raided the pages of *Gospel Blazes in the Dark*, the festschrift for Ed Schroeder that we first mentioned in [ThTheol #702](#) (Topic: Plain Speaking). In fact, this week's essay follows closely on the heels of #702, in which Timothy Hoyer reflected on Ed's urgent call for preachers and theologians alike to use "nickel words," rather than polysyllabic jargon, in their telling and probing of the Gospel. This week's essay is by our own Jerry Burce, who has been writing in this space since Ed retired from it. Here Jerry takes up the concept of nickel words in the context of justification. In so doing, he teases out the tangled interplay of syntax and semantics that can make words such fascinating, tricky, and powerful little beasties.

To make Jerry's essay fit the Thursday Theology format, we've had to make some cuts, including the omission of his introductory and concluding analyses. (If you want to see the entire essay, which is well worth the read, please let me know by reply to this e-mail and I'll send you a copy.) In his original introduction, here omitted, Jerry explains that Ed is a consummate practitioner of the "nickel words" technique that he preaches. As you will surely note as you read below, Jerry himself is another gifted craftsman of the stuff of nickel words. I myself learned this fact about Jerry years ago as a member of Messiah Lutheran Church in Fairview Park, Ohio, where he now serves as Senior Associate Pastor. In the pews at Messiah, I grew up on years of Jerry's sermons, which were full of indelibly earthy words and images-things like dirty fingernails and smelly feet and pangs of joy or sadness or conviction felt in the pit of the belly. And, of course, all

these good, strong, Anglo-Saxon nickel words served a purpose far deeper and greater than the simple joy of beautiful language. In their everyday dirtiness and directness, they pointed to the Word who Himself took on the dirt and grime and everyday language of the people for whom He was sent. As the Christmas words of John 1:14 still echo in our ears, may you find in this essay a renewed appreciation of the power of words, and of the one Word, full of grace and truth, who took on flesh and dwelt among us.

Peace and Joy,
Carol Braun, for the editors

Nowhere does theology need the Schroederian gift of plain speaking more badly than in discussions of the doctrine of justification. Such discussions have, for centuries, floated in the ether of abstraction, certainly as they've been conducted in English though also in German. Let the Germans, at least, hang their heads as being without excuse. When they take up the subject they get to work with a sturdy native compound, *Rechtfertigung*, that puts the basic issues out in the open where savant and clodhopper alike can grab hold of them. At stake is *die Recht*, what is right, and at issue is how to end questions about this-to render them *fertig*, or, as Americans are these day so abysmally prone to say, to bring closure to them. That such questions suffuse the muck and mire of every person's everyday life ought to be obvious. To theologians serving the God whose glory was to wallow in that muck, it ought to be equally obvious that their work is not done until they've engaged the matter at precisely that level.

Such things are by no means as transparent for speakers afflicted with the Latin compound, justification. Latin is the helium of the English language, and often its hot air. The point

from the beginning was to raise the chosen few above the burlap-clad peasantry by cloaking their tongues with the verbal equivalent of linen. Along the way the chosen few became the middle class, and the middle class decided that learning Latin was a waste of time. The consequences for thought and conversation were two. Early on we lost sight, strictly speaking, of what we were talking about. Then we severed the mental connections that had tied us, however feebly, to facts on the ground. Away we float. Today's average seminarian will not have a prayer of extracting *facio* from "justification." One hopes she'll dig out "just." But if she does it cannot occur to her as a matter of course that she's wandering on turf ploughed by the likes of Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing*. Weak in Greek or too lazy to use it, she'll then spend her preaching career not noticing how her English translations in all their versions make a listener's hash of Romans by rendering the same family of words with Old English compounds here and Latin compounds there, with the result that Average Joe, sitting in the pew, can't begin to hear how the apostle is speaking throughout to his own gnawing sense that "things ain't right"-*ungerecht*, as Cousin Hans would say.

Meanwhile, the theologians who ought to be jumping in to help at this point-don't. Says the cynic, there's something seductive about sucking on that helium. To argue theories of justice is somehow more ennobling than to tackle Joe's anxiety head on, using Joe's basic terms: "right"; "wrong"; "making right." Indeed, merely to speak of something as "just" is already to have floated several feet above the gritty question of whether it's right. Joe, in the meantime, is still stuck on the ground wondering about the stuff that ain't right and how it gets fixed. Whence cometh his help? From the Lord who made heaven and earth, to be sure-*Verbum caro factum est*-though not, as a rule, from the Lord's theologians who are surpassingly reluctant to

reduce their own *verba* to the immediacy of Joe's anguish.

It would be a mistake, of course, to read the above as a backhanded plea to strip modern English of its Latin-based vocabulary. It cannot be done. Theologians and other academics are not the only ones who would notice this. So would Average Joe. He would notice, for example, that the very word "notice" is suddenly off limits, along with a few thousand other words that crop up in his everyday conversation. Among the words Joe would miss badly are those of the *just-* family. "Justice" to be sure, but also "justify" and-yes-"justification." "Can you justify that deduction?" Joe asks his tax counselor. Or his boss: "You want *another* personal day? What's your justification for it?"

This raises an obvious question. If "justification" is a piece of Joe's everyday vocabulary, why is it hard for him to grasp what theologians are talking about when they use the word? One will object, perhaps, that a prior question is being begged, namely whether Joe really is in the dark when the theologians speak. Answer: he is. The data supporting that answer are as clear and accessible as the theologians' own memories of how long it took them as undergraduate seminarians to figure out what their professors were carrying on about, or, as they struggled to make sense of what they were hearing, how it was (for example) that the participle "justified" could properly be modified with the phrase "by faith."

To recall such struggles and then to puzzle them out is to recognize a subtle though quite distinct shift in meaning as the key words pass from everyday usage into the realm of theology or vice versa. Theologians, locked in conversation with distant predecessors and therefore wrestling with words on the predecessors' terms, should expect themselves still to be

investing those words with shades of meaning that have long since passed from common currency. This is certainly so where “justify” and “justification” are concerned. Consider the leading American translations of Romans 4:5, where one trusts him who “justifies” either the ungodly (RSV, NRSV) or the wicked (NIV). Here “justify” is an intensely active verb that effects a change in its object, a human being. But this is not how Joe uses that verb these days. “Justify” for Joe is a far feeble thing, more limited in its application. Three aspects of its weakness bear particular noting.

First, when Joe uses “justify,” the verb’s direct object is never a human being. As his work day unfolds or as he sorts things through at night with his spouse, Joe justifies decisions, actions, qualities, characteristics, appearances, etc. He does this incessantly. He does it always for what he construes as the benefit of human beings, beginning with himself as First Human Being; but these human beneficiaries always stand grammatically in indirect relation to the verb itself. Thus he will justify his child’s bad grades to the end that the child’s frustrated mother will get off the child’s back. He will never say, however, that he is justifying the child.

Second, Joe’s “justify,” while technically an active verb, is functionally passive. It does not alter, accomplish, or effect. It merely makes an argument about that which is and always will be the case regarding its object. The child’s string of D’s, justified, do not suddenly become B’s. What does change, presumably, is the mother’s opinion of the D-producing child and her consequent approach to it. For example, instead of deeming it lazy she now deems it incapable and lightens up a little. But the grades themselves still stink. Joe, not only average, but also honest, will be the first to admit this.

Third, Joe takes for granted that some things-many things-cannot

be justified. They are, as he will say, “unjustifiable.” Here the gap between the common and the theological uses of “justify” becomes vivid. In theology the verb’s object, a sinner, may be unjustified; but a sinner is never unjustifiable, for the obvious reason, one might suppose, that the justifying agent is the God with whom all things are possible. But to speak of a justifying agent is already to mystify Joe, again, by employing “justify” in a way that is foreign to him. In theology both roots of the word, *just-* and *faci-*, are busy and active. In Joe’s usage the second root, like the human appendix, has withered into decorative futility. His concern as a justifier is only whether the thing at issue is already right, or at least right enough to deflect an adverse judgment on whoever may be deemed responsible for it. Tellingly, when a thing is wrong or even less than good, Joe thinks that justifying it is a lesser and a shabby alternative to making it right. “It’s wrong?” he barks. “Then fix it. Make it right. But *don’t* try to justify it!” No wonder eyes glaze with incomprehension when pastors read from Romans on Sunday morning.

To help cut through the glaze the faithful theologian will need to push Schroeder’s dictum one step further. Use nickel words, yes. But in using them attend also to their semantic currency, that is, to nickel meanings.

One may well ask whether the nickel and the theological meanings of “justify” are so at odds that theologians, preachers, and translators ought to quit using the word altogether, if not among themselves then certainly in their communication with the theologically untutored. But first one does well to take a last look at Joe’s “justify.” It happens these days that he or someone he knows-his secretary; his word-processing child-is regularly using the word in a secondary, technical sense. Says

the secretary: "Remember, this report will be landing on the desks of some finicky people. It needs that finished professional look So let me justify the right margin."

It is doubtful that the secretary, saying this, will make a connection between "justify" as she's presently using it and the justifying she'll do when she makes her pitch for a pay raise at the annual performance review. But the reason for this lies not so much in the conceptual gap between the activities in question as in the manner in which the verb gets used. When she tells Joe that she'll justify the margin she is suddenly employing the word not as she ordinarily does but as theologians do. Both roots are in play. Now it's a genuinely active verb, portending a vivid change in the object on which it bears directly, of which it cannot be said that the thing is unjustifiable.

So it turns out that Joe knows the theologians' syntax after all. In that conversation with the secretary he uses it himself. The faithful theologian, recalling Joe's earlier lament about ragged and broken reality, will find here a point of contact through which to slip him the good news of God's justification of the ungodly in terms that she, the theologian, is entirely at home with. Herewith a proposal as to how that might be done with a measure of wit and imagination.

"You have heard," says the theologian, "about the great book that St. Peter consults at the Pearly Gates, the one in which is written every deed ever done. Set that legend aside, for legend it is, and not because it makes too much of St. Peter (though it does) but because it makes too much of our deeds. Of themselves our deeds don't matter. What matters are those things that others say about our deeds. What finally matters is what God says about them. The day God gets around to final matters is known quite rightly as the Day of Judgment.

“Imagine, then, not a book but instead a great piece of paper, a single sheet on which is written every word ever spoken in true and honest judgment on human beings. Each person gets her line, I mine, you yours, and on my line are all those things that others have said of me, things to my credit in black, unhappy things in red. So also for you. It is, to say the least, an enormous paper.

“Look now at the lines. All begin neatly, as you’d expect, over there on the left side of the page. Immediately past that the jumble begins. Some lines are incredibly long and still growing: Plato’s, for example, or Attila the Hun’s. Death, after all, is not the end that people crack it up to be. That you die does not mean, necessarily, that people will stop talking about you. Sometimes, depending on how you die, it merely increases the talk, as in the case of Elvis, or Julius Caesar, or recently and horribly, Mohammed Atta.

“This happens too: sometimes, as the talk-beyond-death unfolds it changes in character. The words, stretching out on the page, turn from black to red or vice-versa. That’s what happened on the Thomas Jefferson line a few years ago when the Sally Hemings episode came to light. Who knows what color ink old Tom will be getting a couple hundred years from now?

“Most lines, of course, are fairly short, some scarcely more than a word or two. On the vast majority of lines activity has stopped and the ink is old. That’s because most human beings aren’t worth talking about for very long at all. That said, every line is unique. Each ends in a different place on the page. Each is differently mixed with red and black letters. Taken as a whole, the page is a horrible mess.

“Got the picture? Good. Let’s go on.

“In this picture your line and mine are still in process.

Neither of us can know how it will look when it's done-how long it will be, or how mixed with red and black. We are not, as a rule, privy to the things that are said about us. Nor do we really know what kind of words our deeds will produce. We can see in other lines the amount of red ink that do-gooders have gotten on account of the "good" they thought they were doing. That by itself will dismay us. Worse, perhaps, is the thought that even as we sit here talking together we cannot know what color ink we're generating for each other, or how much of it. I won't tell you, not really, not fully. You won't tell me. There is not a living soul who controls his own ink. That people deny this simply earns them more red.

"This leaves us in a horrible pickle, even if we interpret the picture glibly, the way popular American religion might. In that view our final outcome will depend on the amount of ink we get, and in what proportion. St. Peter counts letters, it is thought, and he does so for God. More red than black, and you burn. More black than red, and he gives you a harp. Lots more black-a nice long line of black-and you get a super-harp.

"Does this sound silly and crude? It should because it is. The biggest flaw in this theory is that it sells God short. It accuses him of sloppy standards. Look again at the great page with all those lines, some short, some endlessly long and still growing, almost all of them badly mottled. You would not yourself accept a report in that condition. You would tell whoever was responsible for it to go clean it up, or else throw it away. Why should God's standards be lower than yours?

"In fact God's standards are infinitely higher than yours. What he demands is perfection in every line, clean black text stretching out to an infinitely far right margin. Every line that ends sooner disappoints him. A single red letter jars and offends him.

“What shall be done with the mess on the great paper? The doing, whatever it is, has got to be God’s for reasons too obvious to waste your time in spelling out. One solution is to delete every line that offends. But that would mean a blank and empty paper. Scriptural stories tell us that God toyed a few times with that solution. In every instance he backed away from it.

“The other solution is to clean the lines up. Enter Christ Jesus, the Word made flesh as St. John calls him, or as you yourself might say, Joe, the Word-Processor of word processors-XP Word, where XP is not the Microsoft system brand (please!) but Chi Rho, the first two letters of “Christ” written in Greek. Christ comes so that through him God can justify us, that is, he can straighten out and extend the living lines of text that we finally are. Here’s how he does it. First, Christ absorbs all the red ink ever spilled or yet to be spilled in any description ever thought, spoken, or penned of any human being. (‘I forgive your sins,’ he says.) Second, in his dying-his deletion on the cross-the red ink is deleted with him. (‘He bore our sins on the tree,’ it says.) Third, in his rising he pronounces a new judgment on us. (‘Peace be with you,’ he says.) That judgment overlays every other judgment ever uttered about us, and it puts down, for each of us, a line of clear black text that runs from the left hand side of the Great Page endlessly to the right. That text, by the way, is no longer just about me or just about you. Instead it’s an unending comment on what Christ did for us-God’s comment first and foremost, though not only God’s. The holy angels are pitching in for good measure (remember the fields of Bethlehem?) and these days the saints as well, they and anyone or anything else that’s able to tell it like it really is when it comes to Jesus. The comment, every last multiplying letter of it, is uniformly positive. On and on the words run, along your line and mine and everyone else’s too. Implicit in the running is the promise of our own resurrection

from the dead so that Christ's words to us and about us will continue forever, as will the words others speak about Christ being for us, as will the words we get to say about Jesus in our own turn. That's how the page gets all straightened out.

"Think of it, Joe, like this. When your secretary, using MS-Word, wants to clean up a report, she justifies the margins. Here's how. She highlights the text and hits Control-J. Bingo. There it is, all beautiful, just the way you wanted it. "In the same way when God, using XP-Word, wants to clean up the Great Page of humanity, your line and mine included, he justifies the ungodly. Here's how. He highlights the text and hits Control-JC. Bingo. There it is, all beautiful, just the way God wanted it.

"And that, dear friend, is what justification is about. You can trust it or not. Be warned: there is not another program out there that will do for you as Christ has done. In the end, God will deal with you according to the word and standard-the line of text- that your own heart clings to: If Christ's, then according to Christ; if another's, then according to that other. If necessary the Delete key is still standing by.

"Are you ready for the kicker? When God sees you trusting Jesus, as in Jesus-for-you, it tickles him so well that he starts talking about you. Just about you. 'All right,' he says. 'Bravo.' The letters are clear, the letters are black, and on and on they go for all eternity. As some wise old Lutherans once said, "For God will regard and reckon this faith [i.e. in Christ-for-me] as righteousness in his sight." [*The Augsburg Confession*, Article VII. From *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*. Kolb and Wengert, editors. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000, p. 40.]

Joe will get this. Theologians will argue about it. To some it

will seem trite, to others wrong. Many will regard it as both trite and wrong. But this is why conversation continues among theologians. What is urgently needed is that the conversation continue (or perhaps begin) on the ground, at Joe's level, around terms, meanings, and metaphors that ordinary people ordinarily use. Otherwise the purpose of theology is thwarted. That purpose, as the late Gerhard Forde convincingly argued, is to equip preachers to preach Christ. [See esp. p. 30 of Gerhard O. Forde, *Theology is for Proclamation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990).] Christ preached, of course, is preached to Joe and all the other members of the milling crowd, harassed and helpless, for whom Christ in his compassion commissions preachers in the first place (Mt. 9:36; 10:1).

In the Thursday Theology pipeline-

January 5: Bishop John Roth, "How to Disagree Well," thoughts on how to approach the ministry of building up the body of Christ, even in the face of divisive issues.

January 12: Steve Albertin responds to Bishop Roth's "How to Disagree Well."

Images of Christ, Part 2

Colleagues,

This week we send along the continuation of Fr. Joest J. Mnemba's 23-year-old reflection on how to help hearers in his native Malawi "get" the Gospel. "Who is Jesus Christ for us?" he

asks as he wraps things up below; and when he reveals in his footnotes that Robert W. Bertram supervised his doctoral dissertation at the Lutheran School of Theology in Chicago, those of us who were likewise blessed to know Bob as teacher will hear the professor applauding the question. It's one of at least two, he wrote, that theologians with mission on their minds have got to press as they attempt to bridge not one but two great barriers that separate hearers of 2011 from the prophetic and apostolic witness of Scriptures that were penned in the first century and earlier. The first of these is Gotthold Lessing's famous "horrible ditch," the immense gap in time, habit, and conception between then and now. Bertram called this the "horizontal" gap. The second "vertical" gap is the greater one of unbelief, the refusal to admit the apostolic notion that the Christ to whom the Scriptures bear their witness should be of any real use to me in my dealings with God. For much more on this see Bertram's *Doing Theology in Relation to Mission*, to my mind a required piece of reading for anyone who intends to think with any seriousness at all about either theology or mission.

It strikes me that in pressing the "who" question Mnemba is working primarily on the horizontal gap, a gap made wider in Africa by separations in two directions, one from the Mediterranean milieu of the first century, the second from the European imagination of the 19th and 20th centuries. The term "Christ" is itself a first century concept. The missionaries who introduced it to Malawians did so, one guesses, with Sunday School pictures of an ethereal Caucasian Jesus. Who could blame confused hearers for saying, "What have we to do with that fellow?" Notice, then, how Mnemba works to dispense with the European diversion and connect the Scriptural witness directly to life as Malawians know and understand it. Western readers may be jarred by this. So be it. A taste of the medicine one dishes out to others can be instructive.

Whether Mnemba also makes progress at helping his fellow Malawians bridge that second, vertical gap is another matter. Let me press you to think about that as you read. Is it enough, for example, to ask who Jesus is? Aren't some other questions equally if not more important? One that Mnemba's doktorvater kept pressing is "How is Jesus for us?" See, for example, his masterful *How Our Sins Were Christ's*, another piece that would-be theologians should be obliged to read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest. Intertwined with this question is another: "Why Jesus? For what earthly reason was the Son of God dispatched to camp out for a time in human flesh that got crucified (John 1:14)? And granting that he did, what difference does that make for me today?" Until one accounts sufficiently for that, there's no reason that anyone, be she a first century Palestinian Jew or he a twenty-first century Malawian Gentile, should pay this Jesus any heed at all.

Observing this, I catch myself wishing that Fr. Mnemba could somehow be with us next month at the Crossings Conference in Belleville, Illinois. It would be fun and doubtless tremendously instructive to push these questions with him. Could be you'll be there. We certainly hope so. (Yes, dear laggard, there's still time to register!) If we do get to see you, let's be sure to push the questions among ourselves. Indeed, if not for this very conversation, why bother to come at all?

In the meantime Christmas descends, and with it the grand opportunity to offer ourselves yet again to God's service in the bridging of gaps both horizontal and vertical. Again the angel's evangel: "Unto you is born this day a Savior which is Christ the Lord." May we who tell it tell it well. May we who hear it believe our ears and sing the angels' song.

Peace and Joy,
Jerry Burce, for the editorial team

Images of Christ in Africa – Part 2

Christ as the “Lamb who was slain” (Cfwansembe or nsembe images)

The symbolism of Christ as the “lamb who was slain” is also very meaningful for our people. In the olden times, a sacrificial victim, nsembe was slaughtered mainly to remove evil or sin from the community, and to prevent death. The actual killing marks the peak moment of the sacrifice. A good example is that of the Ngoni custom mpuntho/mtsamiro, having some people killed to accompany a dead chief in the next life. [1] This could be interpreted as a form of sacrifice.

Again, among some African peoples, an animal, e.g. sheep/nkhosa, becomes symbolically the “scapegoat” for the sins of the community before being slain. [2] People, for instance, touch the animal to dramatize their wish to cast off their sins and to transfer them into the sacrificial victim. Similarly, we could look at Christ hanging on the cross, as the suffering servant, as somebody who has become such a victim. Among other things, he freely and lovingly accepts to bear the sins of the world: “Father forgive them” (Luke 23:34). His death on the cross is thus a liberating action of forgiveness or reconciliation for all people (John 3:14-17; Numbers 21:4-9). [3]

Jesus as the Healer – the medicine man (sing’anga)

In Africa and in Malawi wholeness is experienced by human beings at various levels: in rapport with nature, in bodily health, in expectation of survival after death, in social and physical integration, in the sphere of human morality and in the world of the cosmic and spiritual forces. [4] For the ordinary villager, sickness is a relational problem. That is to say, one is sick not because his sickness, matenda, has been caused by germs or

bacteria as Europeans or medical people would have us believe: the root cause of the trouble is that one has not related well with his or her neighbors, with the community, or with the spirits above. [5]

In taking a thorough diagnosis of their clients, medicine men sometimes take very dramatic means to restore the appropriate relations which have been broken. The sing'anga and his assistants act as spies or informers, who try to find out what has happened to make the sick person sick. [6]

Moreover, as Mbiti observes, sickness and disaster are themselves religious phenomena. [7] Sickness indicates difficulty in communicating with the deity. Disease is a sign among our people that something somewhere went wrong. Isn't that the impression we get in Jesus' action in the Gospels? Didn't Jesus for example, connect sickness, dumbness, paralysis and leprosy with sin and guilt? (John 5:1-9; Luke 5:8-24; Mark 9:14-25.) Didn't he begin his healing process by saying, "Your sins are forgiven"? Furthermore, it is realized by the ordinary person walking on the street that healing cannot be worked by medicines alone. Healing will be complete if it has some connection with God. That is why today in the Christian Church, through gifted Church leaders like Archbishop E. Milingo [8] and through the African Indigenous Churches healings have become an important element of worship. [9] Jesus is called upon to heal not only part of the body, say the spiritual, but also the whole person. In this context, the imagery of Jesus as sing'anga, healer, may well prove to be the most popular, and the one with which African peoples can most readily identify with.

Jesus Christ as Chief (Mfumu/Inkosi ya Makosi)

It can be stated without any hesitation that the most important aspect of Malawian traditional society and other African

societies is chieftaincy. In particular, the Chewa, Tumbuka, Ngoni, Yao, Lomwe, Nsenga chief was not only a political figure but also religious. An African chief filled a sacred role. His stool, the symbol of his office, was a sacred emblem. It represented the community, their solidarity, their permanence and their continuity. The chief was the link between the living-dead and the living (together with the not-yet born), and his highest role was when he officiated in the public religious rites: initiation rites, spitting blessings on the land or fire, offering sacrifices for rain, leading thanksgiving prayers and so on. [10]

According to this mentality, the chief is at once a judge, a commander-in-chief, a legislator, the executive and administrative head of the community. [11] It was not a case of many offices, but a simple composite office to which various duties and activities, rights and privileges were attached. In Malawian society, Chauta is sometimes seen as a great paramount chief, Inkosi ya Makosi, who is so big that he has to be approached through sub-chiefs and other official spokespersons.

In our African Christology, we propose to think of Jesus Christ as the Mfumu. Just as the chief in olden times exercised a sacred and priestly function, [12] so does Jesus exercise a similar function when he is a high priest between God and humanity. [13] Our specifically Christian emphasis would be that Jesus' priesthood and kingship are exercised not just on earth as Pilate had imaged (John 18:36), but as performed in the heavens (John 18:35-36; 17: Hebrews 5).

Conclusion

The objective of this paper has been to examine some key African ideas in view of enhancing our appreciation of Jesus, as a local person. Historically, people of all cultures and generations

have had to answer for themselves Jesus' classic question: "Who do people say I am?" and the corresponding haunting challenge: "And you, who do you say that I am?" (Mark 8:27-30).

In walking the same path in the Malawian context one has to continue to ask: Who is Jesus Christ for us? What are some of the titles that could accurately identify his person and mission? In this paper I have tried to do just that by defining his various titles as Lord of Creation, Mediator, the First-Born of Creation, the Lamb who was slain, the Healer and Chief among many others. [14] It is my contention that the more we believe in African use of our own local titles for Jesus the Christ, the more we shall experience him as our personal savior and master. [15] Thus, we shall no longer accept uncritically or superficially the traditional faith-formulas of the past, as introduced by Western missionaries; we will increasingly appropriate Jesus the Christ of African personal life stories: "No longer does our faith depend on your story [i.e. the version of the missionary]. We have heard for ourselves, and we know that this really is the savior" of the African world (John 4:42).

Footnotes

[1] K. D. Phillip, Onani Angoni (The History and Customs of the Angoni-Chichewa), (London: MacMillan and Co, Limited, 1965), pp. 62-64.

[2] J. Mutiso-Mbinda, op. cit. p. 52.

[3] P. S. Minear, John: The Martyr's Gospel, (New York: The Pilgrim Press, 1984), p. 1322.

[4] A. Shorter, Jesus and the Witchdoctor, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1985), pp. 1-44.

[5] J. W. Gwengwe, Kukula ndi Mwambo (Growing up in the African Tradition-Chickewa) (Limbe, Malawi: Malawi Publications and Literature Bureau, 1965), pp. 92-107.

[6] J. W. Gwengwe, op. cit., pp. 106-107.

[7] J. S. Mbiti, African Religions and Philosophy, (London:

Heineman, 1969), pp. 166-200.

[8] E. Milingo, *The World in Between*, (Maryknoll, NY:) Orbis, 1984), pp. 73-102.

[9] B.G.M. Sundkler, *Bantu Prophets in South Africa*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1961), pp. 180-273.

[10] J. D. Mosonhi, *Kali Kokha n'kanyama* (No man is an Island – Chichewa) (Likuni, Malawi: Likuni Press, 1969), pp. 49-55.

[11] J. Pobe, op. cit., p. 95.

[12] J. W. Gwengwe, op. cit., pp. 19-31.

[13] R. Kysar, *John: The Maverick Gospel*, (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1976), pp. 98-118.

[14] Many of these insights were largely inspired when I did my doctoral dissertation under Robert W. Bertram. See J. J. Mnemba, "The Battle For the African Church: Developing a Conception and praxis for the Ecumenical Church in Malawi", Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Chicago, 1986, pp. 220-224.

[15] C. Bussman, *Who Do You Say? Jesus Christ in Latin American Theology*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1985), pp. 37-47.

P.S. Just noticed. We promised last week to pass along the tale of how a Malawian Catholic priest happened to land at the intensely Lutheran Seminex and thereafter at LSTC. Here's what Ed Schroeder told us—

Whilst I was in the systematics chair at Seminex I got into contact with "Third World theologians"—spurred into action by [Missions Prof] Bill Danker— and got them to Seminex for short stints in January. I think we had a total of eight such folks over the years. Thus I finessed getting [Bishop Patrick] Kalilombe [of Malawi] to Seminex for cheap (he was already in the USA on someone else's plane ticket!) for a January intermester week or two to give us his brand of African theology. He was pioneering grass-roots stuff that undermined

the hierarchy—and eventually got him in trouble with Rome. It was that taste of Seminex that nudged Kalilombe to send his whizkid theologian-priest Joest our way.

JEB

In the Thursday Theology pipeline-

December 29: Jerry Burce, “Justification in Nickel Words,” an essay that uses plain language and sharp image to dispel the clouds of abstraction that surround the idea of justification.

January 5: Bishop John Roth, “How to Disagree Well,” thoughts on how to approach the ministry of building up the body of Christ, even in the face of divisive issues.

January 12: Steve Albertin responds to Bishop Roth’s “How to Disagree Well.”

Images of Christ

Colleagues,

This week and next we offer you successive installments of an essay one of us plucked from Gospel Blazes in the Dark, the mini-trove of papers we told you about in ThTheol #702 (<https://crossings.org/thursday/2011/thur112411.shtml>). The author is the Rev. Dr. Joest J. Mnemba, a Roman Catholic diocesan priest in Malawi who, back in the '80s, earned a doctorate at Christ Seminary-Seminex and the Lutheran School of Theology in Chicago. Ed Schroeder recalls having been in steady

conversation with him during his time at Seminex, though he can't recall having had him in class. Early in the past decade Ed and Marie spent several days in Malawi at the behest of Fr. Mnemba and his bishop, Patrick Kalilombe, who had dispatched him to Seminex in the first place. How the bishop got to know about Seminex is next week's story.

Fr. Mnemba takes up a topic that his pastoral and theological counterparts in the U.S. pay too little attention to, we fear. At issue is the Gospel, the "mega-joy" that God's messenger "good-newsed" some shepherds with (so reads the Greek) on the original Christmas night. The question is how to describe "this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us." If Americans and westerners in general are less inclined than once they were to come "with haste" to check it out, might this be due in part to the western church's insistence on using desiccated words and concepts to identify the One at the heart of the fuss? "Unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord." Yes, blessed be the preacher or parent who repeats this a week and a half from now; but let him or her remember that none of the key words in that sentence packs the punch it once carried. U.S. presidents don't style themselves as "saviors of the world" the way Rome's Caesars did. Not even the English, I'll bet, will still doff caps and mutter "m'lord" as the local poobah saunters by. Gone, in other words, are the cultural resonances and political overtones that made these terms a critical frame of reference for grasping the wonder of who Jesus is-and of equal importance, who he is not.

And if we think we've got a problem in the West, try conveying the good news of Jesus in sub-Saharan Africa. This, of course, is Fr. Mnemba's calling, one that he's been busy with for a good long while. The paper you'll read was first presented in 1988 as a public lecture at the University of Malawi's Chancellor College. He wants to know (you might say) how the Word-become-

flesh can dwell among Malawians in such a way that they too can behold his glory. Knowing neither the language nor the culture, we can't begin to weigh the aptness of his proposals as a means of connecting the Scriptures' witness with the lived experience of a particular people. Nor do we know what reception his ideas got from the local cognoscenti, or whether anything came of them. If we urge you to take the time to read them anyway, it's because, like it or not, we all face the challenge of connecting biblical language and image with the verbal and conceptual currencies of the cultures we swim in. Perhaps a close reading of Fr. Mnemba's effort will help you identify some principles to bear in mind as you tackle the challenge yourself-already this Christmas Eve.

A caveat. Our own questions for Fr. Mnemba would center on the nature of the task that Christ was born to accomplish as much for Malawians as for Canadians, say. We suspect there's more to be said on that subject than he manages to say here. But more on the subject when next week arrives. For now, enjoy.

Peace and Joy,
Jerry Burce, for the editors

Images of Christ in Africa – Part 1

Introduction

The picture that most African Christians have of Christ is that he is an “expatriate” or mzungu, like the missionary who introduced him. That is to say, he is the God of the West, a stranger to Africa. While Christ must always be an “outsider” (i.e. above any culture), under certain aspects it still remains true that if Christianity is to be really identified as local, then Christ must be understood, not as an alien, but as the one

who was to come, the one who comes to fulfill the deepest aspirations of all human searching for God.

We have to remember that Jesus as a historical person is both particular and universal. As a particular individual, the man Jesus belonged to the Jewish ethnic group and culture; but as the one risen from the dead, as the glorified one, he is no longer limited to a particular culture. [1] Because he is a universal person, Africans have also the right and privilege to see him in terms of the fulfillment of African tradition. We can see him, therefore, as the fulfillment of ancestral dreams for a powerful mediator. What follows is an attempt to provide one way of depicting meaningful images of Jesus the Christ in the African context.

Lord of Creation (Mwinimoyo/Namalenga)

The image of Christ as “the Lord of Creation” is the one that seems to be most relevant to the African way of life. [2] Throughout Africa, people look at the World and the entire universe as sacred. The world is the domain of the spirits, whether it be in the forests, rivers, mountains, lakes or in the sky. In this respect, ancestors play a great role in the lives of the living. In particular, they are the progenitors of life acquired from God, which they in turn effectively share with their clan descendants. Parents therefore do not just give life to their children at one point, say at the moment of birth; they continue to give life. [3]

Here, it is not only human life that continues to flow from God. All other life that is necessary to sustain humanity-the life of plants, the sun and the stars, the life of minerals [i.e. with their curative powers]-all flow continuously from God. Because of all this, Africans tend to believe in a common origin of life and a common destiny for all. There is therefore an

interdependence between human life and the universe which supports it.

When Christ is introduced into such a world-view, he seems to embrace all creation and seems to transcend even the ancestors. Why is that so? In the African philosophy of life, in particular focusing on life as sequence of “self-giving” or sharing, one of the most important presuppositions is that the flow of life is a necessary condition of our being able to live fully.[4] As the Chichewa proverb puts it so well, kupatsa nkuyika, (to give is to put by). Really, to live authentically or meaningfully as a social person, we in our turn must automatically pass on life. Jesus can be interpreted as the Ancestor, the Creator or Life-giver as dramatized in John 1. Furthermore, the Johannine Jesus says of himself as the supreme life-giver: I have come in order that you might have life-life in all its fullness [5].

Christ as our Mediator (Mkhalapakati)

The idea of mediation is one of the most common in African societies. The king or chief is normally never addressed directly, but through mediators. In the same way, ancestors who are considered to be very close to God, the fountain of life, play the role of mediators for the living when these want to approach God in moments of distress, drought, crisis or other calamities. [6] In the same vein, Christ could be seen as one of our elder brothers who intercedes for us after his death and resurrection. Moreover, in virtue of the fact that he sits at the right hand of the Father, he fits in very well with the African idea of mediation, in particular as having a powerful intercessory role. Besides, not only does he surpass the ancestors, as Son of God he becomes our professional intercessor.

Some key passages in the Bible seem to highlight Jesus’ role as

a mediator in a more powerful light. The priestly prayer of Jesus in John 17 is one such example. Jesus is also presented as a powerful mediator or high-priest through whom we are led to the Father in the classical texts of Hebrews 5: 1-10; 8:11-28. From these texts it is obvious that the African concept of mediation is in complete harmony with what the Bible is saying.

Christ as “the First-born of Creation” (Mbadwa/Mwana wachisamba)

Jesus Christ can also be seen as “the First-born of creation”, who has passed before us to the Father and has been lifted up so that he can draw all things to himself. In our African Traditional Religion, ancestors are the great mediators or intermediaries. The living people or offspring, mbumba have a real solidarity or communion of life with their deceased ancestors sometimes called the spirit fathers or elders of the clan, makolo. These living dead guarantee stability, solidarity and progress in the present community. [7]

In this respect, we could also assert that Christ is our “Ancestor” par excellence, because he plays the role of mediator and because through his passion and death he has actually proceeded us *adatitsosolera njira* in “passing over” to his Father. He is therefore the Mbadwa, the first citizen of heaven. Moreover, as scripture attests, before Jesus’ death on the cross, “many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised.” After Jesus’ resurrection they came forth from their tombs and entered heaven so that the rest of humanity could follow.

Another equally enlightening presentation of Jesus as the Mbadwa is discussed in the farewell discourses of John the Evangelist [especially in chapters 14-17], [8] where Jesus says among other things: I go to my father to prepare you a place [14:3]. Besides, he emphasizes the fact that he is the source of new

life, the way, the truth, the life, the head, the vine and so on. This way of speaking is very much in line with African thinking. Therefore, this image of Christ as “the first-born of creation” appears to be most relevant.

Footnotes:

[1] An excellent discussion of the motif “Christ and culture” can be found in H. R. Niebuhr , Christ and Culture, (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1951), pp. 116-41.

[2] John Mutiso-Mbinda, “Anthropology and the Paschal Mystery” in B. Hearne (ed.) The Paschal Mystery of Christ and of all Humankind, (Eldoret, Kenya: Goba Publications, 1979), pp. 51-52.

[3] J. G. Donders, Non-Bourgeois Theology (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1985), p. 11.

[4] J. G. Donders, op. cit. p. 12.

[5] The motif “life” is one of the most popular in the gospel of John as it is mentioned fifty-two times. For an extended discussion on this see, Jose Comblin, Sent from the Father, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1981), p. vii.

[6] J. Mutiso-Mbinda, op. cit. p. 52.

[7] J. Pobee, Towards an African Theology, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1979), p. 81.

[8] F. Ellis, The Genius of John, (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1984), p.81.

In the Thursday Theology pipeline-

December 22: Part 2 of Fr. Joest Mnemba, “Images of Christ in Africa.” Christ as Lamb Who was Slain, Christ as Healer, Christ as Chief.

December 29: Jerry Burce, “Justification in Nickel Words,” an essay that uses plain language and sharp image to dispel the clouds of abstraction that surround the idea of justification.

January 5: Bishop John Roth, “How to Disagree Well,” thoughts on how to approach the ministry of building up the body of Christ, even in the face of divisive issues.

Christmas Eve Preaching

Colleagues,

This week we’re giving you a sermon to read. Here’s why.

Many among us preach for a living. This means that one of the vocation’s great challenges is presently breathing down our necks. It’s the sermon on Christmas Eve, a time when churches, at least in America, are fuller than at any other time save Easter morning. This is the closest that most of us will get to the kind of evangelistic opportunity certain missionaries enjoy as a matter of course. The crowd that evening will be generously sprinkled with folks who rarely come to church, most of them connected in a faint and feeble way to the congregation. They once got baptized, confirmed, or married there; they’re still on the rolls getting lots of mail they don’t respond to; their grandparents are steady attendees, and showing up to please them on Christmas Eve is part of the drill; etc. The point is, they’re there, interleaved in pews or chairs with the steadfast types who are able not only to recite Luke’s story by heart but also to spit out five different ways in which the birth of Jesus is excellent news for them, their dear ones, their friends, neighbors and co-workers, their whole wide world for that matter.

Comes the first dilemma. To whom does the preacher pitch the

preaching? To the in-crowd or the outliers? Shall she wear the hat of pastor or evangelist? Whose darkness will he probe, the one who bobs back and forth between faith and doubt or the one who doubts as a matter of course and thinks that Santa brings as much or more to the Christmas experience as the swaddled baby does?

My own vote, for what it's worth, falls on the evangelistic side of this distinction. Let the starving be fed first, and without (thank you) forcing them first to ingest the snide comment or two about how, really, truly, they ought to show up at church more often than they do for the food God gives. That may indeed be the case. Observing it in the circumstances of Christmas Eve is also bound to harden ears and hearts and keep the starved ones skinny. Better by far that they should hear a word so sweet that they'll spill into the night hankering vaguely for more. (Your thoughts on this? Send them in.)

Second dilemma. What does it take by way of diction, image, and content to stir a yen for further hearing? To address this we asked several preachers to send us some past Christmas Eve efforts. They gamely obliged ("Thank you, thank you!"). We turned these over to a small team of lay readers and asked them to pick the one that spoke to them most effectively, where "effective" equals God's good news for us in Christ heard vividly against the backdrop of the bleak Christ-less alternative. All the readers, by the way, are of the steadfast type that makes a habit of listening to preachers and knows the story inside out, so whether their reactions are a good gauge for the kind of food the underfed can swallow is somewhat up in the air. Still, they're closer to a reasonable guess at this than most of us preachers are.

The sermon they settled on was preached in 2006 by the Rev. Dr. Arthur C. Repp, Chris, for short, distinguishing him from a

grandfather of the same name and title who went by “Art.” Chris is the pastor of Epiphany Lutheran Church in Carbondale, Illinois. He also has a PhD in Russian history with a special focus on the Orthodox Church and spent four years teaching theology and church history in Russian at a Lutheran seminary in St. Petersburg. One of the readers sent along a richly thoughtful comment on what she saw in Chris’s work. We’ll lead off with it as incentive for you to read yourself. We think it will also give the preachers among you some clues about things that ears may well be reaching for when you take another stab this Christmas at passing the Promise along.

Let us know, by the way, if you find this helpful-or not. It will help us with plans for future postings like this. Send comments either to me (jburceATattD0Tnet) or to Carol Braun, the person you’ll reach if hit the “Reply” button.

Peace and Joy,
Jerry Burce, for the editors

Lay Reader’s Comment-

The words and images of Luke’s Christmas story are deeply familiar to me from years of Christmas Eve services, storybooks, greeting cards, rebroadcasts of the Charlie Brown Christmas special. Chris’s sermon takes one familiar line from that story-the host of angels proclaiming “Peace on Earth!”-and he gets into the core of what those words really mean, what kind of peace is really in store for us. He cracks the words open, showing us that the key to the whole story is the need for peace between us and God. The overall effect is not to destroy the familiar emotional resonances of the story but rather to heighten and clarify them, making the words even more meaningful by fitting them clearly into the story of our broken

relationship with God and God's marvelous method for fixing that rift. By the end of the sermon, I'm seeing the whole Christmas story with fresh eyes and a full and grateful heart.

Pr. Repp's Sermon-

Christmas Eve 2006

Luke 2:1-20

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Well, it's beginning to look a lot like Christmas-everywhere you go. No, really. It's the most wonderful time of the year-the hap- happiest season of all. And I've been dreaming of a white Christmas, but it looks like global warming is taking care of that. In spite of that, though, I hope you'll all have yourself a merry little Christmas now.

I'm guessing that you were hoping for a little more than that when you decided to come out to church tonight for this Christmas Eve service. I'm guessing-and hoping-that you were looking for something different from the continuous, inescapable barrage of generic holiday music in the stores, and on the radio and TV for the past month and a half or more-something a little deeper than Santa hats and frosty snow men, something more meaningful than the Christmas sales at the mall had to offer. I'm guessing that you came out tonight to hear again that timeless story of the birth of Jesus-the journey of Mary and Joseph from Nazareth to Bethlehem, the inn with no room for the expecting mother, the newborn Christchild laid in a manger-the shepherds, the angels, and the announcement from heaven of glad tidings of great joy. There is something that captures our imagination in this story. Something that touches us deep within our souls. A savior is born. God almighty enters our human condition as one of us, a human child. Angels speak a message of

peace and simple shepherds become eyewitnesses to history in the making.

The Christmas story from Luke's gospel, as I have observed before, is one that we hear much more on an affective, emotional level than we do on an intellectual level. It is the imagery and the feeling that we respond to. Childbirth. Mother and child. Angels illuminating the darkness and announcing good news. Advertisers know this, and that is surely one reason at least that the Christmas season is so exploitable and exploited by our merchants. But because we tend to respond viscerally to this story that we know so well, we may miss some of what it is trying to tell us.

One of the things that I think most of us are prone to miss is the message announced by the multitude of angels that join that original angel after the proclamation of Jesus' birth to the shepherds. "Glory to God in the highest heaven," they exclaim, "and on earth peace among those whom he favors!" And the main reason we miss the message here is that it has been so well used-but not for its original purpose. The idea of peace on Earth has a universal appeal that is easily abstracted from the specific details of the Christmas story, and even the immediate context of the angel's message. Who can disagree with its sentiment? Who wouldn't want there to be peace on Earth? That has to be the reason that I saw that message on so many Christmas cards this year when I was looking to buy our cards. And it's a message that resonates even more deeply for us at the present time, when our country seems to be stuck in an intractable war in Iraq, when we face a resurgence of chaos in Afghanistan, and when the decades-old conflict between Israel and its neighbors seems to be farther from a solution than ever. Add to that the genocide in Sudan that is spilling over into the neighboring countries of Chad and the Central African Republic, unrest in the Congo, Sri Lanka, and many other parts of the

globe, together with the ongoing fear of terrorism in our own country, and “peace on Earth” would seem to be the one message that our torn and broken world really needs to hear this Christmas season, and in the coming New Year. If only we could stop the fighting and the violence and destruction that breaks out all too often and all too easily. If only, in the now famous words of Rodney King, we could just all get along.

You may be surprised to hear, then, that this is not what the chorus of Christmas angels meant when they proclaimed “peace on earth.” They did not have in mind the cessation of hostilities between warring bands of humans, at least not directly, nor were they endorsing the Pax Romana, the peace that the Roman Empire, the superpower of the day, imposed on its subjects by force and incentives. The peace that the angels announced was rather peace between humans and God.

That will come as a surprise to you especially if you weren’t aware that we were at war with God. But that is exactly how St. Paul describes our relationship to God in his letter to the church in Rome. All of us have sinned. Jews and Gentiles, rich and poor, men and women, boys and girls. That means that all of us have rebelled against God and God’s good purpose for our lives, choosing instead to go our own way, to serve our own selfish interests at the expense of our fellow humans and the world God created. All of us, says Paul, are God’s enemies.

Only when we understand that fact and take it to heart can we grasp the message of the heavenly host that appeared to the shepherds. The angels were calling a truce between heaven and Earth, and sending out a mediator to sue for peace—a mediator who was the very God, incarnate in human weakness, come to reconcile a rebellious humankind to a merciful God. The traditional Christmas hymn “Hark, the herald Angels sing,” hits the nail on the head. “Peace on Earth and mercy mild: God and

sinners reconciled.”

Jesus comes among us as a little child with a mission: to grow into a man and to die on a cross for the sake of the world that God so loves. His death and resurrection accomplish the peace that the angels announced, and his sending of the Holy Spirit enables us to live into that peace by turning from our selfishness back to God, and opening ourselves to our fellow human beings. And when we take the message of the Christmas angels to heart and live into the peace that God both offers and accomplishes for us, then we can begin to realize the possibility of peace on Earth in the way we originally envisaged it. Because when we are reconciled with God, and only when we are reconciled with God, then we have the resources we need to be reconciled with one another, and peace on Earth in every sense becomes possible.

That’s even better news than we first thought. Those are truly glad tidings of great joy. May you hear those tidings as the great good news they are this Christmas Eve. May you take the message of the Christmas angels to heart. And may the peace of God that they proclaimed, the peace that passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

In the Thursday Theology pipeline-

Next week & December 22: Fr. Joest Mnemba, “Images of Christ in Africa,” a reflection well suited for days of recalling how the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.

December 29: Jerry Burce, “Justification in Nickel Words,” an essay that uses plain language and sharp image to dispel the clouds of abstraction that surround the idea of justification.

January 5: Bishop John Roth, “How to Disagree Well,” thoughts on

how to approach the ministry of building up the body of Christ, even in the face of divisive issues.

Preview of Next Month's Fourth International Crossings Conference

Colleagues,

Five years ago, in January, 2007, some 150 pastors, laypersons, seminarians, and theologians gathered in Belleville, Illinois, across the river from St. Louis, for the first-ever conference of the Crossings community, whatever that amorphous designation might mean. The meeting was billed somewhat grandly though also accurately as an “international” conference. John (Joe) Strelan of the Lutheran Church of Australia was on hand to present one of the keynote addresses, and other participants came from as far away as Singapore. Those of us who had a hand in organizing the event were delighted to learn in the aftermath that a good time had been had by most-so good and by so many that we promptly organized a second conference (Oct. '08) and after that a third (Jan. '10). Last year we caught our breath with a briefer and less elaborate seminar (Jan. '11). Prompted again by strongly positive feedback, we forged ahead with plans for a fourth full-blown conference, the onset of which is now less than two months away. Again we get to call it an international event. One of the main speakers will be flying in from Port Elizabeth, South Africa, and we hear that other participants are coming from Singapore and Germany.

For today's edition of Thursday Theology we've called on two splendid servants of Christ, both named Marcus, to tell you why you'll want to get there as well, by hook or by crook, via plane, train, or automobile. The dates are January 23-25, or 22-25 if you're interested in a day's worth of pre-conference presentations and discussions. Once again we'll meet at the Shrine of Our Lady of the Snows in Belleville. See below for a compelling description of what you'll find there.

It's by no means too late to register, of course. It can be done online

at <https://crossings.org/conference/2012conf-reg-form.shtml>. For a complete overview of offerings, schedule, speakers, accommodations, etc., go to <https://crossings.org/conference/default.shtml> and click through the tabs.

And while we're still holding the microphone, a couple of quick reasons of our own for urging you to be there if at all possible:

- a. So we can meet you So we can rejoice together face to face in our astonishing calling to embrace, trust, and pass along the best thing going in the all the world, the Word made flesh and dwelling among us, Christ Jesus is his name.
- b. So you can spend time with others who care as deeply as you do about distinguishing Law and Promise and telling the Gospel accurately and well, the cross lifted high, the love of Christ proclaimed as the hymn exhorts.
- c. Because we'll be talking throughout about discipleship, apart from which the tasks touched on in a. and b. above can't and won't be done.
- d. And speaking crassly, because it's about the best deal to be found anywhere in the U.S. where theological

conferences are concerned. Check the price list.

Speaking of deals, we've recently been informed by our key organizer, Cathy Lessmann, that a donor has stepped forward to underwrite tuition costs for any seminarian who chooses to attend. Do you know one? Pass the word! Underscore that all they have to do is get to Belleville. Everything else will be covered, pre-conference expenses as well if they sign up for the Track A program. This applies also to pastors in their first post-ordination year of ministry. Tell them too.

Enough from us. On to today's main voices.

Peace and Joy,
Jerry Burce, for the editorial team.

About the Crossings Conference, 2012

1. A Chief Reason for Attending *The Rev. Dr. Marcus Lohrmann, than whom a finer pastor and pastoral theologian is nowhere to be found, is bishop of the ELCA's Northwestern Ohio Synod. A couple of months ago he wrote to some of his small-"e" episcopal colleagues about the pending Crossings conference. We got his permission to pass along a portion of what he said to them-*

So often a discerning lay person will say something like, "I like my pastor and I like my congregation but I yearn to hear the Gospel." The marvel is that many of our leaders would say, "Yes, I am preaching the Gospel."

I continue to believe that "tending the Gospel" is linked to understanding Law/Gospel theology which seeks to "make use of" the incarnate, crucified and risen Lord Jesus. This is central to Lutheran identity and our contribution to the church catholic. Hence, I unabashedly commend the

Crossings Community which seeks to be a resource for such holy work.

I'm planning on attending [the conference]...and "getting fed". I need to keep re-learning this stuff! I've also persuaded several budding/blossoming theologians in the family to accompany me. I will plug this within our synod and hope that you will consider attending and encourage others to do so as well.

2. A Preview of the Conference*The Rev. Dr. Marcus Felde, pastor of Bethlehem Lutheran Church in Indianapolis and a member of the Crossings board, took on the task this summer of editing the quarterly Crossings newsletter. The next edition, due this month, tells about the conference in Marcus's trademark prose, ever a credit to the language he speaks best. Again with permission we pass along a large chunk of that, hoping also that this will tempt those of you who don't get the newsletter to ask for it (info@crossings.org). We also invite you to look at <https://crossings.org/conference/speakers.pdf> for more information about the speakers Marcus mentions here-*Let me quote the official synopsis of what our conference will be about:

What does it mean "to follow Jesus" today?

That question is often answered in self-help therapeutic and moralistic tones, as though "to follow" means "to imitate" Jesus, as if he were a model of common sense behavior and sensibility, as though discipleship were rooted in the demands of the law. But such a view of discipleship produces, at best, anxious Christians, and, at worst, presumptuous

ones. This conference revisits the theme of discipleship in order to recover both its biblical and gospel basis. "To follow Jesus" means first and foremost to trust him and what he promises to do to and for us as we make our way with him in church and world. It means to follow him to the cross. At the heart of discipleship, then, is the invitation "come and die with me," as Bonhoeffer observed. Exploring the counterintuitive power of this invitation to create a genuinely gospel-given life is what this conference is all about.

Besides revisiting the theme of discipleship, the conference will also "revisit" Our Lady of the Snows center and its Shrine Hotel, which has provided hospitality to each of our earlier conferences. We look forward to the quiet atmosphere, pleasant surroundings, the good conversation around round tables, fine meals including deluxe continental breakfast where you make your own waffles, and the nip in the air as you walk between the two buildings. This would be a great place to spend January 23-25 even if the topic were "Banality Revisited: Should Christians Be Good?"

But we are not gathering in Prettycity (Belleville?) to rehash the obvious. We want to reboot a concept which, used in the wrong way, can do actual harm to Christians. Remember section one of the Hippocratic Oath: "First, do no harm"? My hunch is, Jesus in his Nazarene twenties listened respectfully to a whole lot of preachers. He put up with their stuff for a few years, before exploding

(mildly): “They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others; but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them.” Is that Matthew 23:4?

Revisit the concept with us. What does it mean to be a disciple, to follow Jesus? What on earth did Bonhoeffer mean by his “come and die with me”? (Which is not what he wrote. Read the second edition, now available as volume 4 in Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works. Look up this footnote on page 87:

In the earlier English version of The Cost of Discipleship, Fuller translated this famous aphorism as: “When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die.” The austere German text reads “Jeder Ruf Christi führt in den Tod.” Literally, that says, “Every call of Christ leads into death.”)

Revisit the aphorism. And wonder with us what he meant to communicate thereby to us. Especially given that he also equates “discipleship” with “being bound to the suffering Christ” and at the same time “nothing but grace and joy.” Huh?

Every time a Christian tells me “I’m not really very religious,” I suspect I have found one more person who thinks discipleship is for martyrs-in-training like Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was executed at 37 for binding himself to the suffering of Christ, the suffering of Jews, the suffering of his country. Is it really that special and onerous? This is worth revisiting, so we can heartily commend discipleship without people only hearing what a heavy burden it is, and how hard to bear.

As for the structure of the conference, we are offering something different this time, which we hope will be an improvement on past conferences. Everyone will get to hear all the speakers, since each of them will address the whole assembly. Instead of having to pick and choose for breakouts, you will be addressed by-and have a chance to interrogate afterwards-a large number of speakers addressing the big question from their own particular angle, or according to a particular question we have asked them to tell us about.

Steve Kuhl will launch us and set the course with three talks which will outline our days: "The Disciple and Christ," "The Disciple and the Church," and "The Disciple and the World." His subtitles indicate where he is going with those broad topics: "Faith Alone," "The Fellowship of Faith," and "The Hidden Discipline, or Faith Working Incognito." But he will not be sailing alone. He will have conversation partners under each heading. For part one, Mark Mattes evaluating contemporary views of discipleship and Robert Kolb offering a history of "discipleship" in the Lutheran tradition. For part two, Matthew Becker on the theologian as a disciple of Christ (is it possible??) and Martin Wells on the church executive as disciple of Christ. (Is this eye of the needle stuff, or what?) (Get over it. I'm just kidding.) For part three, Kathryn Kleinhans just in from A College Campus suggesting we "tweet" if we love Jesus, and (this I can't wait for) from South Africa Pastor Felix Meylahn on "Following Jesus when Things are Falling Apart." Whew.

If you like, you may come a day early to what we call the "pre-conference," a sort of "early bird special," an option with two tracks. "Track A" persons will spend the day with Cathy Lessmann and me (Marcus Felde) learning how

to get all the good out of a text using the Six-Step Method for studying a Bible text, like when you are preparing to preach or to hear a sermon. If you are not sure why the weekly “Sabbatheology” text studies are organized in that manner, come and let us elucidate. We’ll look at a lot of those, and teach you to do it yourself.

“Track B” will be terribly exciting, and I’m going to be sorry to miss it myself. In the morning Jerry Burce will lead people through a quick Crossings-style overview of the Gospel of Mark. In the afternoon, a couple of Bonhoeffer experts (Matthew Becker, Richard Bliese) will be leading a seminar on Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who-did I mention it before?-wrote a book about discipleship.

Speaking of which, I like Bonhoeffer’s interpretation of Mark 8:31, to the effect that when setting the terms of discipleship, Jesus

begins remarkably by setting them entirely free once more. “If [emphasis his] any want to become my followers,” Jesus says. Following him is not something that is self-evident, even among the disciples [emphasis mine]. No one can be forced, no one can even be expected to follow him.

So I guess no one should be forced or even expected to come to the conference, since the disciple is not above the master. Still, we wish you would.

See you in Belleville, I hope.

In the Thursday Theology pipeline-

Next week: Best Christmas Sermon, selected by lay readers from submissions by an assortment of Law/Gospel preachers

December 15 & 22: Fr. Joest Mnemba, "Images of Christ in Africa," a reflection well suited for days of recalling how the Word became flesh and dwelt among us

December 29: Jerry Burce, "Justification in Nickel Words," an essay that uses plain language and sharp image to dispel the clouds of abstraction that surround the idea of justification

Plain Speaking

Colleagues,

Seven years ago the Crossings board commissioned a festschrift to help celebrate Ed Schroeder's 75th birthday. 17 contributors sent in an assortment of essays and one hymn. Editors Steven Kuhl, Sherman Lee, and Robin Morgan assembled them under the title "Gospel Blazes in the Dark: A Festival of Writing Sparked in Honor of Edward H. Schroeder," and got 100 copies printed. All were quickly snapped up at \$20 a pop. Teasers appear on the Crossings website (see under the Library tab), but not the essays themselves. Barring a sudden clamor for another few hundred print versions the only future for that work lies in getting it online-which, serendipitously, affords us a nice little launching pad for the post-Ed Thursday Theology adventure. Over the next several weeks and months we'll be plucking from the trove for useful reading even as we wait for responses to last week's invitation ("Send! Send!") for contributions from all of you. (Hot news: the first of you has

broken cover with an offer of submissions on four superb topics. Stay tuned.)

Today we kick things off with a “Gospel Blazes” essay by Timothy Hoyer, D.Min., pastor at Gloria Dei Lutheran Church in Lakewood, New York, on the shores of gorgeous Lake Chautauqua (southwestern corner of the state near the border of Pennsylvania). Tim is Ed’s nephew. Over the past decade he’s written regularly for Sabbathology and now and then for Thursday Theology. Here he honors his uncle with a reflection on a motif that bubbles up fairly often in Ed’s work, i.e. using “nickel words.” For any of you unfamiliar with U.S. coinage, a nickel is the American five cent piece. Twenty nickels make a dollar. Two or three weeks ago I read a report that the metals used in producing a nickel are worth eight cents. That’s a good tip-off to Tim’s basic point about the extra value one gets when one pitches Gospel-talk in the everyday words that ordinary people prefer to use.

Peace and Joy,
Jerry Burce, for the editors

“My speech and my proclamation were not with plausible words of wisdom, but with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God” (1 Cor 2.4-5).

Nickels are cheap. They are almost useless. That is why the jars on store counters, with a sign taped on them begging for help for a local kid with cancer, are filled with pennies and nickels. So, in this North American world where education is valued and big words make one sound important, nickel words are scorned. When Ed Schroeder says, “Or in nickel words,” some think he is using cheap, useless words, and that he is insulting

them.

But, in a world where one billion people live off of less than one dollar a day, a nickel is important. In a world where millions cannot read, where millions get no education, nickel words are the coin of the realm.

Nickel words are important for telling others what one means. When the doctor uses big words, such as polymyalgia rheumatica, the patient says, "In English, please, Doctor." Or the patient turns to his son and gives his son a look that asks for help. Only when the son uses familiar words, nickel words, does the father understand.

The death and life of a man named Jesus also make nickel words important. Jesus came from a village that was looked down on as worthless as a wooden nickel, "What good can come out of Nazareth [the sticks, or the wrong side of the tracks]?" Jesus claimed he could forgive people their sin, that he could get them on God's good side. And people were attracted to Jesus' claim because they felt they were on God's bad side. They, try as they might, could not get themselves on God's good side. They knew that. They were told that.

Life itself tells everyone that they are not on God's good side. Everyone on earth knows that their lives are always being judged, measured, "weighed and found wanting." When people see a baby, they ask, "Is she a good baby?" A good baby sleeps through the night and eats well and does not cry a lot. Children in school are graded on their every action-character, punctuality, attendance, reading level, tests, quizzes, homework, participation, how well they get along with others, the clothes they wear, the friends they play with, and how well they perform in sports. Next, when people work, their value is in their productivity, the amount of their paycheck, the kind of job they

have. Families have to measure up to “family values.” And at last, people who are old will evaluate their own lives. Not all of them will be able to say, “I have lived a good, long life.”

All that evaluating and measuring is God’s word. Not that anyone recognizes that evaluation as God’s word. To most people, God’s word has to be grand, bigger than ordinary nickel events. God’s word has to be like The Ten Commandments-carved out of rock by fire from a cloud. God’s word has to deal with the big things, the important things, not the everyday nickel chores. However, the problem with making God big is that God is left out of the day-to-day life of people. Even worse, God is not trusted to be in those day-to-day events and measurements.

To describe that measuring and evaluating, the Augsburg Confession in Article 1 uses about two hundred twenty-six words, including “divine essence” and “incorporeal.” In nickel words, Ed Schroeder says the same thing, “We live by the word of God, the Ultimate Judge.”

All people relate to God as a judge. One hundred sixteen words of the Augsburg Confession describe that relationship with God in Article 2, Original Sin. Ed Schroeder writes, “God’s word at first is bad news: There are no good guys.”

That is very bad news. But it gets worse. If God’s word is only that no one is good, the remedy would be everyone trying to be better, even with a little help from Jesus. The worst part is that God is against bad guys. God is so against the bad guys that God is the major sponsor of all funeral homes worldwide, in fact, the only sponsor.

The number of words in the next two articles of the Augsburg Confession could also be counted, but it is the nickel words of Ed Schroeder that make those articles not just part of a debate before a German prince but good news given to people who hear

them. And hearing the words, understanding the words, is essential: For “faith comes from hearing, and what is heard is the preaching of Christ.” The Augsburg Confession uses the words “propitiate” and “reconcile.” Ed writes, “Christ is for the bad guys.” Those words catch people’s attention. Not only because they are nickel words, but because those words are so surprisingly good. Everyone thinks the hero who saves the day is against the bad guys. But here is Christ, the Son of God, saving not just the day but saving people by being for the bad guys. And if someone is a bad guy in God’s eyes, there is immense relief to hear that Christ is for you.

When Jesus was on the cross, everyone thought he was worth even less than a nickel, less than a penny. He was worthless. And like all worthless things, Jesus was thrown away, as all people are thrown away. He was thrown away into a grave, into the dirt.

“But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God. God is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption” (Cor 1.27-30). God raised Jesus from the dead! God has made that worthless nickel the most foolish value there is for us.

Because God raised Jesus from the dead, there is more, even better, surprising good news. Ed Schroeder proclaims, “Christ-trusting bad guys are now good guys. So says the Judge. Key word: faith.” Those nickel words are clear, useful, hearable words that are valued because of whom they name. They name Christ, crucified and risen for all!

Another use of nickel words is Ed Schroeder’s translation of the

story of the woman caught in adultery who is brought to Jesus to measure and evaluate. Everyone else has done their evaluation and said that she deserved death. After Jesus got rid of all the evaluators by having them evaluate themselves, Jesus turned to the woman and said that he did not evaluate her. Instead he was on her side. (Jesus is for the bad guys.) She was free to "Go and live as a non-sinner," as Ed Schroeder puts it. She was regarded and reckoned as righteous to God.

Not many people have agreed with Ed Schroeder's translation of that verse. Most think that Jesus told the woman to go and behave from then on and not do anything wrong again. But one's hermeneutics is determined by one's soteriology. Or, in Ed's nickel words, "How you read the Bible depends on what you think you need to be saved from." Ed's nickel translation proclaims that all people need to be saved from what God thinks of them. The other translators are too small in their faith in Christ and so only say that people need to be saved from doing the wrong things.

All Christ-trusters are free to go and live in that freedom of being a non-sinner. For, as Ed Schroeder says, using nickel words, "If Christ makes you free, you are free all the way!" Where people were disconnected from God before because of measurement and evaluation, and God was left out of their day-to-day lives, now people who are Christ-trusters have free access to God. With free access to God, Christ-trusters are free from the law, free from the law telling them what to do, and are free to be led and guided by the Spirit of Christ.

Ed Schroeder has been free as a Christ-truster to tell others that Christ is for them, using words that they can afford-nickel words. If some think that nickel words are weak, foolish, worth nothing, remember that God has chosen the weak, the foolish, the things worth nothing-including a dead Jesus. Nickel words that

proclaim Christ's promise of forgiveness as a result of his death on a cross may seem like foolishness to those who are perishing. But for those who do believe, they are God's powerful words of salvation (1 Cor 1.18). And for one who has heard Ed Schroeder's nickel words and clings to them, clutches them, holds them, and trusts their promise because they are Christ's promise, it is not enough to say thanks. The best that can be said is, "I believe."

In the Thursday Theology pipeline-

Next week: Preview of the Jan. 2012 Fourth International Crossings Conference (ya'll come now!)

December 8: Best Christmas Sermon, selected by lay readers from submissions by an assortment of Law/Gospel preachers

December 15 & 22: Father Joest Mnemba, "Images of Christ in Africa," a reflection well suited for days of recalling how the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.

Whither Thursday Theology? A note from the Board of the Crossings Community

To the subscribers of Thursday Theology:

We write to announce what strikes us at first blush as an exercise in folly. We also write to enlist your help in perpetrating it.

To start with, some background:

701 weeks ago Ed Schroeder launched what nowadays we call a blog, a term that popped into speech about a year or two after Ed had started doing what the term describes. A person is bitten by a bright idea, or many of them, and sees fit for reasons known only to him- or herself to launch them into cyberspace. If her prose attracts an audience, great. If not, the blogger-at-heart will plug away regardless. In the end, thinks she, it matters only that the thing be said.

One guesses that he who told the parable of the sower would have blogged like mad had the internet been a feature of life in first-century Palestine. Or else he'd have assigned the job to someone in the entourage, Bartholomew, say.

Thursday Theology has always been Ed's project. He took it up after writing Sabbaththeology text studies for nearly two years-a task he passed to some associates he trusted to carry on the work while he faced surgery for a faulty aortic valve. When he recovered from surgery, he felt the itch to keep writing. Whereupon he spread his wings and started producing essays. The first is dated 13 May 1998, though on the Crossings website-it's there, and the 699 succeeding posts as well-you'll find it listed as May 14. In 1998 that was, of course, a Thursday. Someone, either Ed or his friend and colleague Robin Morgan, hit a button that day and shot the essay by email to the addresses on the Sabbaththeology mailing list. We assume that alliteration had everything to do with the choice of day and title for that first post. A person who peddles the joy of the Gospel with phrases like "mangered Messiah" and "sweet swap" is one who revels in the music of words well paired. "Wednesday Theology" would not have worked. It rang no bells. Not that this would keep Ed from a later proclivity for hitting the "Send" button on early Wednesday evenings, St. Louis time.

And that's what he did, week after week for 13 years and counting, essay upon essay appearing without fail in his subscribers' inboxes. The content was always and exclusively his choice, no one else's. Either he wrote what we got or he picked and edited it. We who followed it kept reading because Ed was being Ed. At some point he had gotten under our skin, whether as a friend, colleague or teacher in one of the innumerable venues of his peripatetic career, or else as a voice one stumbles across via somebody's passing recommendation or the vagaries of an internet search engine. Ed being Ed meant snappy prose, sharp opinion, and unfailing confessional substance, where the thing confessed is the Gospel of Jesus Christ in its address to the church and the world that we occupy today. Getting that right has always been Ed's passion. Helping others to get it right became the single-minded focus of his entire working life. Thursday Theology allowed him to extend that work into the gray years when theological institutions weren't interested in paying him to do it, and trekking the country as a peddler of the Gospel-seeking methodology he and Bob Bertram had developed under the Crossings label no longer appealed to him. How could it once he had found the internet and discovered that he could push his wares from a keyboard at home to an audience that was wider and farther flung than any he could ever hope to reach by riding on airplanes? In the end we who comprised that audience read and kept on reading because getting the Gospel right mattered as much to us as it did to Ed, and no matter how we responded, whether with delight or dismay, to his grinding of other axes, we found that he almost always had important things to say or repeat on this one essential subject.

Has there been any other voice in the theological blogosphere or for that matter in the broader world of Christian inquiry and opining that has zeroed in on the Gospel question with such unrelenting and revealing focus? We who write and subscribe this

current essay-members of the Crossings Board-don't know of one. If any of the rest of you does, tell us about it so we can pass the news around. As for Ed, he's done. So he says. If he means what he says, then a void opens up that begs to be filled, if only by lesser lights who nonetheless are bitten by the same compelling passion.

We of the Crossings Board, lesser lights all, think we should to try to keep Thursday Theology going. It's a fool's thought, not least because the only way we can imagine pulling it off is by changing the form of the thing itself. That risks an alienation of the audience it's intended for. Or not. That depends on you, obviously.

To repeat, Thursday Theology has been a blog, a one-person show. As such its hold on our attention has been due in large part to the personality and trustworthiness of its author-cum-editor. To continue it will almost certainly have to morph into something else. We on the Board don't have another Ed to pull out of the hat, not even an Ed-Lite. Could be, of course, that he or she is lurking out there in the present audience, unknown to us. The Holy Spirit has always had a penchant for the highly unlikely. See Abraham, Moses, Mary, Paul. See Francis of Assisi or Hans Luther's boy. See half the pastors you've ever met. Then talk to your current pastors and believe them when they tell you that you'd never guess who some of the anchors of the congregation you belong to happen to be. With all such things in mind we're bound to ask: is one of you reading this right now the lurking neo-Ed? Do you wonder if you might be? If so, put your hand up, please. See below for how to do this. We'd love to talk to you, and the sooner the better.

Meanwhile, here are some things we're thinking about, given what we are aware of:

1. There's a bit of thinking and writing talent on our board. There's a whole lot more of it in the Thursday Theology audience of the past few years. We think there's enough of it combined to come up with a substantial weekly posting that all of us can learn from, or at least enjoy.
2. By "substantial" we mean postings that either speak to or reflect the substance that Ed was so single-minded about, i.e. God's good news in and through Christ for sinners whose sinning wears the clothes of the 21st century. Queensland's Neal Nuske came through a few weeks ago with a sterling example of a substantial posting (ThTheol #696), one that doubtless drove lots of us to inspect the hulls of our operative theologies for any limpet-mines that are still attached to them. If it didn't, read again and start searching. This noted, we'll hazard a guess that even if none of you is a lurking neo-Ed lots of you lurkers are like-unto-Neal. You too have something vital to say about the Gospel that others do well to heed. We'll want you to break cover. If you do we think Thursday Theology has a chance at a useful and promising future, one that carries forward the work Ed started so well.
3. As to that future, we're seeing a sort of combination serial journal and community forum. What you'd get, in other words, is a succession of vetted and edited essays, articles, reviews and other contributions by a variety of authors, one per week, interspersed at regular intervals with readers' responses, the latter vetted for charity and edited for length, though not so much for content. Here we'd be departing somewhat from the model Ed established. We understand there was a fair amount of conversation between him and his readers. Every so often he'd lift the flap on that so others could listen in, but for the most part the talk was a two-party exchange, reader-to-Ed, Ed-to-reader; and whether the rest of us got in on the talk

would depend on whether Ed agreed with the responder's conclusions. If not, he wouldn't publish them. Fair enough. It was his baby, as they say. But in the new model, where the toddler's care and feeding becomes the work of many, it's of the essence that the many will get their say, and if the folks with their fingers on the microphone switch find it disagreeable, so be it. The say will be said regardless, allowing others to chime in if and as they so choose.

4. Speaking of these switch-fingering folks, we've asked three members of the Crossings Board to function for now as an editorial committee. The team includes two aging pastors, Steve Albertin and Jerome (Jerry) Burce, both of whom count Ed as a formative teacher in their seminary days, both also having opted later on to add the academically dubious distinction of a D. Min. to their working credentials. The third member of the team is Carol Braun, a newly minted Ph.D. physicist (Northwestern University) whose summa cum laude undergraduate work at Valparaiso included a second major in English. These days Carol teaches both her specialties to sharp and often irreligious high school students at the private Staten Island Academy in New York City. So far the team has cobbled together enough material to keep Thursday Theology going for three more months. What happens beyond that will depend on two things: first, their success in lining up topics and writers for another stretch of months beyond that, and second, the feedback they get or fail to get from all of you. If the interest is there, the project continues. If not it doesn't. Indeed it can't. All three members of the team are up to their chins in the deep waters of primary vocations, and none is a blogger-at-heart who will carry on whether others read or not. Aside from emailed responses, one way of gauging readership will

be to see how often the forthcoming installments attract attention on the Crossings Facebook page. If you haven't seen this check it out. Go to facebook.com and enter "The Crossings Community" on the search line; and if you're a registered Facebook user, take the time to "like" the page once you get there.

5. Here are some key principles that the editorial team will be working with. First, they'll want to favor you with lively, literate writing. Second, they'll insist that every installment of Thursday Theology will continue somehow to confess the Gospel; and if in the confessing it flashes a facet of the Gospel's stunning glory that lots of us have yet to notice, so much the better. Third, they'll require that everything you get will reflect a use of the essential tool for unearthing real-deal Gospel that Luther and Melanchthon honed and wielded to such salutary effect in the 16th century. We refer, of course, to the distinction between law and promise as the lens through which the Bible gets read. This tool, as Ed kept underscoring, is woefully underemployed in Century 21, also within the Lutheran slice of the church catholic where people ought to know better. Addressing that is precisely what Thursday Theology will continue to be about. Fourth, the editors will keep a close eye on the unfolding second decade of the 21st century as the moment of God's address in law and promise alike. "Now is the acceptable time," writes Paul. "Now is the day of salvation" (2 Cor. 6:2b). The Holy Spirit means for us to take that seriously, and we will.
6. As to the range of topics, who knows? To a large extent, that will be up to you who see fit to send in essays. (Send! Send!) Ed had his interests, avocations, and pet peeves. He wrote a lot about the Church's mission. He grieved and raged over post-9/11 America. He argued over

and over that “Gay Is OK,” to quote one of his titles. He didn’t always convince all his readers. We know that, and we’re willing to entertain alternative arguments that meet the specifications outlined in the paragraph above. This goes with broadening the conversation, as again we must if the project is to continue. We hope you’ll see a lot of work on the never-ending task of couching the Gospel in real language that real people really speak; on finding points of conversational contact with folks who can’t imagine a use for a dead Jesus let alone a living Christ; or on puncturing the persistent folly that dismisses the wrath of God as a piece of pre-modern nonsense. Now and then we’ll feature a sermon contest, submissions to be juried by a team of lay readers who know what to listen for in a sermon worth sitting through. Look for the first of these early next month.

With this we quit, hoping we’ve whetted your appetite for further reading and even more your interest in pitching in. (In case you missed it the first time: “Send! Send!”) For now address comments, proposals, and submissions to Jerry Burce, jburceATattDOTnet, who will pass them along to the others on the team. Burce will say, by the way, that he isn’t exactly holding his breath over the prospect of an overflowing inbox. He’s spent too many years tracking responses to pleas for help in parish Sunday bulletins. We dare you to surprise him.

A quick closing thought, or maybe two. This really is an exercise in folly. Sanity screams that Thursday Theology ended last week with Ed’s swan song, and the poet Pope would laugh at us for daring to flout that. Still, the Christ Ed confessed so well has a thing for fools, and he’s absolutely worth looking foolish for. You who know and relish the Gospel get that. With this in mind, away we go. For how long and to what end, who but the Spirit is able to say?

In the meantime, peace and joy. That was and remains Ed's unfailing blessing. It adorned every piece he sent us in the 700-piece stretch, testifying in a wonderfully succinct way to the true glory of Christ. "Trust him," said Ed. We say it too and will keep saying it also without fail for as long as this continues. Peace and joy. In Christ, of course, always and only, world without end. Amen and Amen.

And for Edward H. Schroeder, faithful servant of Christ, and for all his works, words, and weekly gifts these past 13 years: thank you, friend, colleague, teacher, mentor. Much more to the point, thanks be to God!

On behalf of the Crossings Board-
Jerry Burce
Carol Braun
Steve Albertin

The End of the Line: It's All About Faith and the Promise

Colleagues,

Today is Martin Luther's 528th birthday. Last Sunday was my 81st. Eighty-one. That's three times three times three times three. The trinitarian number to the fourth power, the number of the New Testament gospels. Seven hundred is one hundred times the Sabbath number. So it's in the numbers. A fitting time to bring Thursday Theology over my name to Sabbath closure. Thursday Theology #1 was posted 699 Thursdays ago, on May 14, 1998. The Crossings board of directors has planned to keep it

going. So stay tuned – I hear that something is already in the pipeline to come a week from today.

For today's swan song a collection of Luther quotes – it is, after all, HIS birthday – all on the topic of faith. If there has been a golden thread through these 700 posts it's been that: the Christian faith and that faith's object, Christ's promise. Here are some short citations from Luther on the topic, translated from Kurt Aland's 1956 Lutherlexikon, a book published while I was doing my doctorate in Hamburg, Germany. Aland apparently read the entire Weimar Edition of Luther's Works – some 70 quarto (big) volumes at that time, I think – and file-carded (no computers back then) Luther quotes on key theological words – eight hundred such terms – from "Abendmahl" (Lord's Supper) to "Zweifel" (doubt). More likely, as a German university professor, Aland had his young academic apprentices do all the hard work and he then published the book. The end product is 472 pages. As usual, the translation was vetted (and improved!) by Marie. After all, for one of the grad school years in Germany she had the scholarship. For the second year she had the job as translator at Shell Oil Company that kept us going.

Remember that in German the word for faith and the word to believe/to trust, the noun and the verb, come from the same vocable stem. "Glaube" and "glauben." So when the translation below shifts from verb to noun, different in English, it was the same sound when Luther said it. The English language is "blessed" by drawing half its vocables from Anglo-Saxon and the other half from Latin. So "faith" tracks back to the Latin "fides" while "believe" is an ancient kin to the word "glauben."

Now, for the 700th time,
Peace and Joy!
Ed Schroeder

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1. As much as you believe, so much is what you have.
 2. Everything depends on faith; the entire Christian life stands on that.
 3. Faith is so noble that it makes everything good that pertains to us humans.
 4. There is no work that can change us from what we are; faith alone can do it and does do it.
 5. Faith is so great a thing that we can never comprehend its might, its power, its strength, its impact . . . nothing is impossible for faith, nothing too difficult. Faith is an immense, marvelous work. Whoever believes is already a lord. And if he were immediately to die, he must yet live again. If he is poor, he must become rich again. If he is sick, he must become well again.
 6. This is faith's peculiar nature, that it attends to and actually trusts something that is not yet present. For what is present one doesn't need to believe; he feels it, he sees it. When a rich person surfeited with money and property believes that he will not die from starvation, that is not faith. However, when someone who has nothing in hand and nevertheless hangs onto, trusts, God's word that God as father will sustain him as he continues to trust God and carry out his calling, that is genuine faith.
 7. This is our chief article . . . and our right, true Christian faith, and there is no other faith, namely, that Christ is true God and man. And such faith is the only one that saves. Whoever wants to have some other faith, let him go that way and see where he winds up. If reason will not believe that God could become human, then let it have its way. But we Christians believe that, for God's Word says so, and for faith nothing is impossible. Reason may

stumble and be vexed at this as it will. It must also be so that whoever would be rescued from the devil's dominion, from sin and death, and be saved, must believe that Christ is true God, by whom the world was made; also true man, born of Mary. It is this faith alone, no other, whatever it may be called, that brings salvation.

8. You should believe neither more nor less unless you have God's word for it. For the essence and substance of faith is to rely on God's word and build upon it. Where there is no word of God, there can and should be no faith.
9. Faith itself is no good work, but is the master-teacher, the living nerve, of good works.
10. You must pay attention and constantly proclaim that faith must not be entangled or bound by any ordinance tied to your work. Let this be your maxim and no other. With such an onslaught or effort [of doing good works] you will come to nothing, that you will see. And if you so persist in that and will not let yourself be turned, then know that I am not standing by your side. I want to have that clearly and plainly rejected.
11. This is the fundamental shape of faith, that each one makes the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ his own. That means that it is not sufficient simply to believe that he is risen from the dead. For from that kind of faith flows neither peace nor joy, neither strength nor power. Rather this is the way you must believe: Christ is risen for YOUR sake, for YOUR benefit, and has been granted this honor not for himself. No, it is for YOU and all who believe in him, all whom he helps, and through his resurrection conquers sin, death and hell, and this victory is his gift for YOU.
12. Faith can be called Christian faith only when you without wavering trust that Christ is not only for Peter and the saints, but also for you yourself, yes for you yourself

more than all the others. Your salvation does not rest on your faith that Christ is a Christ for the good people, but that he is a Christ for you and belongs to you. Such faith makes Christ dear to you and taste sweet in your heart. Then follow love and good works without coercion. Should they not follow, then this faith is clearly not there. For where faith is, there must the Holy Spirit also be present to work that love and goodness within us.

13. I have often spoken of two kinds of faith. With one you believe that Christ is such a person as the gospels describe him and as he is proclaimed. But you do not believe that it is for YOU that he is such a person, and you doubt whether you have these benefits from him now and in the future. Instead you think, "Yes, for the others, for Peter, Paul and the faithful saints, he is such a person. But who knows how he considers me and whether I should expect the same from him and rely on him as the saints do? Look, this sort of faith is nothing, receives and tastes Christ in no way at all, can experience no joy and love from him or to him. It is a faith ABOUT Christ and not faith IN, faith linked TO, Christ. Such faith is what the devil has, along with all wicked people.
14. Where there is no faith, there is nothing but fear, anxiety, dread and sorrow when God comes to mind or is mentioned. Yes, hatred and enmity toward God is in such a heart. That then generates guilt in the conscience and the heart has no confidence that God is merciful and favorable toward it. For it knows that God is sin's enemy and grimly punishes it.
15. This is the unique nature of faith, that its strength is shown in the face of fear, of death, of sins and of everything which would drive a person to distraction and despair.
16. All who believe see God's face without wavering. That is,

they comprehend that God is pure goodness and looks upon them with eyes of mercy.

17. "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" (Hebrews 11:1). That means faith is a confident assurance about those things which in this life we do not comprehend, but can only believe until the time that they will be made clear. Up until now, however, they are still not seen.
18. Faith and Promise are corollaries of each other.
19. Adam was a Christian already long before the birth of Christ. For he had the same faith in Christ that we have. For time makes no difference when it comes to faith. Faith is the same from the beginning of the world to its end . . . Therefore Adam received through his faith what I too have received. He never saw Christ with his own eyes and the same is true with us. But he had Christ in God's word of promise and we too have him in God's word of promise. The only difference is that in his case the promise was not yet fulfilled, but for us it has been.
20. Our faith is still so weak and cold. Were it as confident and strong as it ought to be, we would not be able to live for all the joy.
21. When we begin to believe, we begin at the same time to die to this world and to live to God in the life to come. Thus faith is a genuine death and resurrection, namely, a salvific baptism in which we go under and then come up again.
22. Those who do not believe, but seek refuge in human help, will fall and succumb to death.
23. As you believe, so you love – and vice versa.
24. Feelings and faith are not on the same page.
25. For one who wants to find salvation, he should think as though there were no one else on earth but him, and that all God's comfort and promises throughout the entire holy

scriptures are meant just for him.

26. Faith is not a simple matter, but a highly remarkable thing, for which it would take a person a hundred thousand years to learn it – if only he could live so long.
 27. Faith cannot be grasped by any sort of human wisdom.
 28. Everyone believes at his own peril, and he must see for himself that he believe aright. For as little as someone else can travel to hell or heaven for me, so little can someone else also believe or not believe on my behalf. And as little as someone else can open or close heaven or hell, so little can he drive me to faith or unfaith.
 29. It may be that I have a very modest faith and others great faith, yet it is the ONE same faith whereby I cling to Christ. Just as someone can pour precious wine from the keg into a glass, and someone else into a large silver goblet, but the wine is the same.
 30. Faith looks steadily to Christ. It is focused nowhere else than on Christ alone, who has overcome sin and death and brought righteousness, salvation and life eternal.
 31. Faith itself transforms our thinking and leads to knowledge of the will of God.
 32. Believers must be completely certain that they have solid confidence in God's word or in the promise of grace, that is, the forgiveness of sins for Christ's sake.
 33. Do not be deceived, my dear people; If God is for us (of which I am confident) who can harm us? Faith is stronger than all our enemies. Our lamps can be extinguished by no one.
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Theology of the Cross. Richard Koenig in memoriam

Colleagues,

This post was in the pipeline before I learned of Dick Koenig's dying earlier this week on the very cusp of October 31, Reformation Day (aka the Eve of All Saints Day), turning into All Saints Day, November 1. What marvelous timing for one of the knights exemplar during the Missouri Synod wars of a generation ago. Among his memorable—and often earthy—bons mots was this one: "Justification by faith alone is the bullshit-detector of the Lutheran Reformation. Whenever someone proposes that you need just a little of this or that in addition to trusting Christ's promise in order to be A-OK with God, you should stop them right there and say 'That's BS.'"

Dick's name has appeared off and on in these Thursday posts over the years. His last contribution—ThTh #616—was on April 1, 2010, "The Future of Justification." <https://crossings.org/thursday/2010/thur040110.shtml> [Put his name in the box at the internal google system on the Crossings website to see more of his presence among us.]

What follows below—pretty far down actually—works from the same cantus firmus. Now posted in gratitude for the life and work of Richard. Requiescat in pace!

Ed Schroeder

When the day that he must go hence was come, many accompanied him to the riverside, into which as he went he said, "Death, where is thy sting?" and as he went down deeper, he said "Grave,

where is thy victory?" So he passed over, and the trumpets sounded for him on the other side. [John Bunyan. Pilgrim's Progress. 1678.]

Colleagues,

Still sifting through those file cabinet drawers to reduce "stuff" so that we'll finally fit into our new digs here at Hidden Lake Senior Retirement Community, in north suburban St. Louis. [Don't remember what I've told you about our new digs. If curious, check this out: Still a few unoccupied units available. Come join us.]

Here's what I came up with this time. Something I'd totally forgotten! An unfinished book! How could I forget? Answer: It must have been forgettable. Though now that I look at the four finished chapters, it doesn't seem to be THAT bad.

It comes from the days of the one and only sabbatical (1978-79) that ever came my way during all my years of teaching [1957 – 1994].

1978-79 was right at the middle of Seminex's decade of existence 1974 – 1983. We thought we were going to Hyderabad, India. The principal of the Lutheran Seminary there had asked me to come for a year as guest lecturer. Everything was set. Except for the visa. Which dragged on and on. One delay after another. I even invoked Senator Paul Simon, a friend from earlier days, to plead my case at the Indian embassy in Washington DC. Which he did. But to no avail. Finally there came a flat-out "No! Someone else has been found to take the position." A costly (in those days) phone call to the principal in Hyderabad indicated that was not true, but he had no clout in Delhi, so we weren't going to India. And now it was November. When the fall semester began

in St. Louis, we'd rented out our house to a Seminex student family, so ever since the fall term began, we were sojourning from the spare bedroom of one friend in St. Louis to that of another.

Seminex missiologist Bill Danker came to the rescue. "Want to get third-world exposure? Go to New Jersey." He wasn't joking. In Ventnor NJ (suburb of Atlantic City) was the Overseas Ministries Study Center, gathering place/study place for mission-linked folks from all over the world, most of them Asian, African, Latino. We'd never heard of it, but Bill knew the director, Gerald Anderson, major figure in the missiology world—as was Bill. He made connections and right after Thanksgiving our Toyota Corolla was heading to Ventnor.

But what to do there, besides join the program and get "exposed"? Well, in my original application to my academic dean for a sabbatical the year before, I'd proposed writing a book on Luther's Theology of the Cross . But that was set aside when the exotic India option arrived. So with India out, it was back to the book. And that meant shlepping all 55 volumes of Luther's Works (English edition) along with our stuff and youngest high-school daughter Gail in our teensy Toyota to OMSC.

Where I got mesmerized by the OMSC program, introduced to the whole missiological world (completely unknown to me before), and encountered major theologians from those other worlds.

Result: #1) I got hooked on missiology and #2) the book didn't get done. But three chapters—of a proposed eleven—did. After all, I was obligated to my dean to bring back SOMETHING when I got home to St. Louis again. But there was a detour on that coming back home too. Someone helped me get to Geneva, Switzerland, right after term ended at OMSC—now it's Summer 1979— for a conference sponsored by the World Council of

Churches on Worship and the Arts in Asian and African Churches. That ecumenical exposure was icing on the cake. People I met there, e.g., Lobi Sifobela from Zimbabwe, are dear friends to this day.

Back in St. Louis later that summer—after I reported to the dean what I had (and had not) done on my sabbatical—the three chapters and outlines for the other eight were properly filed. The Sturm und Drang—and Joy!—of daily work at Seminex took over, and “the book” slid off the screen. I still don’t understand why that happened.

Well, enough of this shaggy dog story. You may not want to read any more. But if you do, here’s the original proposal for that book. If Richard Koenig had ever seen it, I can imagine him saying “Ed, that’s just a set of variations on my BS-detector axiom.” He’d be right.

Peace and joy!

Ed Schroeder

A Sabbatical Research Project

THE CROSS AS FORM AND CONTENT is a proposal for studying Luther’s theology as a coherent unity, a system. It sees his reformation work centered on the one “doctrine evangelic,” the gospel itself, as the one and only doctrine of the Christian faith. From this hub radiate all the spokes of Luther’s evangelical system, and back to which hub these spokes direct the reader/hearer.

It seeks to expose Luther’s theology as a praxis theology wherein his system functions as blueprint from which he does his pastoral and professorial and reformatory work. During his lifetime both blueprint and praxis interact to modify and

correct each other.

This first draft outline of the work begins with a two-chapter prolegomena, followed by the fundamental “hub” chapter, and concluding with eight chapters for eight “spokes.” The number eight here is arbitrary. It could be more or less. At present the final eight consist of two sets of four chapters each. The first four (4 through 7) focus on individual Christian existence, the final four (8 through 11) on corporate Christian existence.

In each chapter one or two of Luther’s writings serve as the primary texts from which his own theology is drawn. My intention is to read these Luther texts in large measure as his own Biblical exegesis, which basically they claim to be, and thus to keep Biblical data in the running narrative of each chapter.

Since Luther’s own theology was regularly produced in conflict contexts, I shall seek to give an accurate picture of the antithetical alternatives to which he is saying “no.” My present perception of what is being negated by him is as follows, chapter for chapter: 1) theologies of glory, 2) Christ-less and comfort-less exegesis, 3) legalized Christs and legal salvations, 4) Erasmian anthropologies, 5) moralist or libertine ethics, 6) cheap grace, 7) authority blurs, 8) triumphal ecclesiasts, 9) cross-less pneumatics, 10) blind pastors, 11) mystical or secularist proposals for daily Christian life. It is my intention to devote considerable space in each chapter indicating where in contemporary theology and church life these tempting alternatives are present and operative and then to bring them up against the hub so that they might be reformed.

The two prolegomena chapters propose in chapter one to demonstrate that Luther’s most revolutionary word is his critique of the dominant medieval theologies as theologies of

glory in conflict with the theology of the cross proclaimed by the Scriptures. This is an upset in both form and content for theology. Chapter one will seek to probe the formal and methodological aspects of these two clean contraries. Chapter two is an investigation of Biblical hermeneutics as they take shape under a theology of the cross.

Chapter three will seek to present God's Good News in Christ, the hub of the wheel, under the rubric of "cruciform promise," and to do so mostly by drawing contrasts to the largely promise-less atonement model of Anselm in the heritage which the 16th century had received.

Chapter four through eleven take a spoke at a time, present the material appropriate to the chapter title, seeking all the while to illuminate the linkage between this particular spoke and the hub. My intended watchwords for my prose (received from my teacher Werner Elert) are: simplify, clarify, specify.

At present I have no clearly perceived finale for the work other than the material with which chapter eleven will conclude.

Edward H. Schroeder
St. Louis, Missouri
5 November 1977

THE CROSS AS FORM AND CONTENT: System in Luther's Theology

I. PROLEGOMENA

Chapter 1. Theological Method – The critique of medieval theology under the rubric Theology of Glory. (Heidelberg Theses; 97 Theses Against Scholasticism)

Chapter 2. Biblical Hermeneutics – "Christum treiben" [urging Christ] as clue to reading the Scriptures. Law/promise lenses as the reading glasses. (Introduction to the Biblical Books –

1522)

II. THE HUB

Chapter 3. God's Cruciform Promise in Jesus the Christ – The surprising salvation from a crucified Messiah. (Sermons on I Cor.15; Good Friday / Easter Sermons; The Apostles Creed in Small and Large Catechisms)

III. SOME SPOKES

Chapter 4. Adamic Humanity – the conflict over Biblical anthropology. (Exegesis of Psalm 90; Bondage of the Will)

Chapter 5. The Novelty of Christian Existence: Freedom. (On Christian Liberty)

Chapter 6. The Hidden Discipline of Daily Repentance. (95 Theses)

Chapter 7. God's Two Kingdoms in His One World – Christian existence under God's ambidextrous authorities. (On Secular Authority. Peasant War Writings)

Chapter 8. The Trademarks of Christ's Cruciform Church. (On Councils and the Church)

Chapter 9. The Holy Spirit's Work in Spirited People. (Against the Heavenly Prophets)

Chapter 10. Rightly Dividing Law and Promise: Luther's proposal for preaching and pastoral care. (Galatians Commentary)

Chapter 11. The Lord's Prayer and the Sacraments – Resourcing Christ's people for the ongoing struggle in exile. (Small and Large Catechisms)

A “Lutheran” Spirituality

Colleagues,

Pastor Trevor Faggotter from Australia has been needling me for some time to do a ThTh review of John Kleinig's book proposing a

“Lutheran” spirituality. After temporizing way too long I asked him to do it. He has. Here it is.

Key, says Trevor, for Kleinig is Luther’s understanding of the posture of “faith” being the posture of receptivity. In terms of the madness of American baseball and the World Series here in our town these days, faith is always in the catcher-position, receiving the Spirit-mediated pitches from God-in-Christ. Don’t think that such receptivity is simple laziness or lollygagging inactivity. Ask any catcher! But it’s being on the receiving end and then indeed doing something with what you’ve caught. I imagine that Aussie Kleinig doesn’t use such a baseball imagery—and I don’t know cricket or rugby well enough to try my hand there— but if what Trevor says he says is accurate, then receptivity-spirituality starts by focusing on and then catching what’s coming from “the mound” (aka THE Mount) whence all Gospel-spirited impulses originate.

I’ve asked Trevor to give us some of his biographical specs.

Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder

The Rev. Trevor Faggotter is a Uniting Church Minister in South Australia. He was formerly a police officer and dairy farmer, and he completed a B.Th. at Flinders University while training at the Uniting Church’s Parkin-Wesley College, in the state of South Australia. He was ordained in 1992. He has served as a Minister of the Word at Mount Barker and Peterborough in South Australia, and in Ulverstone in Tasmania. He is currently serving in a Churches of Christ congregation-the Northwestern Community Church, near Port Adelaide-where he also assists an Aboriginal congregation on Sunday evenings, and is a Chaplain to SA Police.

He has received the Crossings e-mails for over 10 years-having come across the material while googling words like 'Luther', 'Law' and 'Gospel'. Trevor has engaged periodically with questions, criticisms and comments from Australia, and has often appreciated Ed's corrective words about that which is spoken by pastors and ministers, yet which totally lacks gospel good news.

Grace Upon Grace: Spirituality for Today, by John Kleinig.

St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House. 2008.

287pp. \$15.99 [10.92 Amazon]

John Kleinig has served the church as a lecturer at Luther Seminary in Adelaide, South Australia-specialising in the Old Testament. In an age when everyone is supposedly spiritual, and the trading of spiritual wares is at a premium, his book, 'Grace Upon Grace' serves the church by teaching us to rediscover receptivity spirituality-God's gift in Christ through the gospel.

John's writing style is warm, personal, forthright and very readable. The contents are original-in the sense that we can hear John talking to us. They are also jam-packed with much of Luther's insight and teaching, as well as that of others, concerning the spiritual battle of a Christian. The reader is mildly conscious of the thorough scholarship, which undergirds and is carefully woven throughout the book.

Foundationally, the reader learns of Luther's receptive spirituality, in which there is a dynamic interplay in Christian meditation between (1) Oratio [prayer] (2) Meditatio [meditation] and (3) Tentatio [temptation]. One prays for the gift of the Holy Spirit, and reads the Scriptures receiving the

external Word, pondering the words like rubbing a herb so that it releases its fragrance-‘For God will not give you his Spirit without the external Word’. In meditating, God in Christ is heard to speak to us! Then, as soon as his Word takes root, the devil and his cohorts harry a person with terrible assaults, temptations and attacks-[Luther’s term for it] *Anfechtung*. Strangely enough, this evil aggression has the spin-off of driving a person back to God’s Word for fresh wisdom, for the comfort of the gospel, and so equips one for further living. ‘Through the attacks of the evil one we are drawn further out of ourselves and deeper into Christ’ (p. 22).

John’s book makes one conscious of the slim pickings and lack of solid foundation that many scrape by on today, when we note how Luther’s receptive spirituality stands in clear contrast to the uncertain patterns of self-promotion-of climbing the ladder of devotion. This is the unsatisfactory introverted spirituality that Luther had learned as a monk, namely that of (1) reading (2) meditation (3) and prayer, ascending upwards to hopefully gain (4) the experience of contemplation, ecstasy, heavenly bliss and spiritual illumination.

Christian spirituality, John shows us, is better likened to being a beggar than what often amounts to little more than play acting. However, John sets the context for our life as spiritual beggars squarely within the liturgical life of the Christian church, amidst the attendance at Divine Service, where Father, Son and Spirit serve the receptive community of faith, and where God’s people participate, through faith in Christ Jesus’ merits and ministry, in baptism, the hearing of God’s Word in the gospel story, the intercessory prayers, the saying of the creeds, the Lord’s Supper, the fellowship and the deeds of mercy and service.

As a steward of the mysteries of God, John really likes to

emphasise the matter of mystery, and so we have chapter headings as follows: The Mystery of Christ, The Mystery of Meditation, The Mystery of Prayer, The Hidden Battle and Hidden Holiness. The comfort of the book lies in the continual emphasis of our place in union with Jesus Christ, who 'Unlike us, Jesus is an expert at prayer'. John spells out the matter of access to the Father and of becoming co-workers with Christ.

The book is full of treasures to share, like 'why the Old Testament rarely mentions Satan while the New Testament speaks about him so often. The advent of God's Son, His appearance in the world, discloses the hidden presence and operation of Satan. So wherever Christ appears and speaks, Satan and the demons are unmasked' (p. 238). As one might expect, there is a wonderful section on the dynamics of the conflict we live in, drawn from John's own helpful rather literal translation of Ephesians 6:10-20.

Most of John's stories are simple and personal. However, although we see the point, some of John's illustrations don't quite do the trick as well as we may like. And I don't think John's usage of the word 'borrow' (rather than say 'receive as a gift') is a winner-since inherent are notions of limitation and of returning something, rather than abundance, freedom, and redemptive (albeit contingent) gift.

The book is extremely accessible to Christians of all denominations and persuasions, and for those tangled in the unsatisfactory D.I.Y. [Do It Yourself] spirituality-which causes bookstore shelves to groan, as well as readers thereof, critics and observers-this volume is a breath of fresh air, a boon and blessing, marked by quality scholarship and gospel clarity. Ideal for a group to read.