

A Bertram Original: Rediscovered Treasure

Colleagues:

Continuing to empty those file folders, I came upon this, a Bob Bertram original unknown to me, and so far as I know, never published before. It carries a date, as you'll see (Bob was in his 80th year), but who the audience was and where it happened are not specified. It's vintage Robert, which means – among other things – you have to pay attention to every word. Here it is. Enjoy.

Peace & Joy!

Ed

Second Sunday (2/18/2001) SALVATION(S)

Summary: When the Christian gospel speaks of the salvation of the world, it raises a question: what is it that is being saved, the world's sinners or the sinners' world? Answer: there is no saving the world's sinners without saving their world along with them, beginning with that part of the world which is closest to them, their own bodies. But how about the reverse, saving the sinners' world without saving its sinners? Ah, that is something else. There may indeed be a saving, a kind of saving of the sinners' world without saving them. Granted, in Christian parlance that may not qualify as "salvation." Yet when that is the best that can be hoped for, then, even if it means losing sinners themselves to their own druthers, it is the Christian thing – the very heart of the Christian pathos – to help them

save as least as much of their world as possible, beginning with their own bodies.

Some Theses for Discussion

B. But how about the reverse, saving the sinners' world without saving its sinners? Ah, that is something else. There may indeed be a saving, a kind of saving of the sinners' world without saving them. Granted, in Christian parlance that may not qualify as "salvation." Here we do have a real disjunction, an either-or.

1. Distinctions serve also this second function. Not only do they RECLAIM what we slight, namely the cosmos. Distinctions also DISCLAIM. Take Jesus' ominous distinction, "What will it profit a person to gain the whole world [KOSMOS] and forfeit one's life" or, better oneSELF (in Greek, PSYCHE)? (MK. 8:36)
2. Here the distinction functions as a disjunction, the sort of either-or which Christians like Kierkegaard emphasized. Either the person himself is saved (and only then his world with him) or he is not saved, no matter how much of his world is.
3. Where it is only the sinner's world, not himself, which he "gains," he is not said to have "SAVED" anything. Here there is no talk of salvation. Not that the lingo of gains and losses is too crass. Jesus actually favors that commercial idiom. The pity is precisely that the mere world-gainer makes no "profit," only a loss, a bad deal. Crass? Sure.
4. Nor is it that the sinner in question has no interest in saving himself. He may indeed. Then why doesn't he succeed at that most rewarding of all ventures? Not for lack of trying, surely. For lack of smarts? Perhaps for lack of a certain kind of smarts.

5. But someone who has “gained” the whole world, why can’t he of all people save himself (PSYCHE)? Because he – even he, he especially – can’t afford the price. Jesus explains: “For those who want to save their life [PSYCHE] will lose it, and those who lose their life [PSYCHE] for my sake and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.” (Mk. 8:35)
6. The reason the sinner cannot save himself is that, in order to do that, he would have to lose himself. And no sinner is entrepreneur enough, fool enough, to risk so dire a loss. Not that the saving of selves is impossible. It is simply unaffordable.
7. For sinners “to deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me,” as Jesus knew, is simply more than they can pay. (Mk. 8:34) “Cross” is the tip-off. The price is so exorbitant as to be impossible, not impossible altogether but humanly so.
8. Before we switch to a passage about healing (which, remember, is the same word as “saving”) notice: in the Markan passage just read Jesus addressed one of the toughest questions in medicine, the high COST of healing. “How,” we hear at every admissions office, “do you plan to pay for this operation?” “Who is your primary carrier”?
9. You would think theologians would have a field day with that question. The currently popular “spiritual” healing seems to avoid it. “Who is going to pay for this?” When the question arises, as it does already at the ER, most patients in my experience intuitively sense that “pay” means more than money. So did Jesus.
10. As the chemotherapy begins, certainly the cancer cells know who will pay. They will. So do bacteria, up against an antibiotic. See how they resist, they who are very much a part of the cosmos. No wonder they yearn for the sinner to get beyond sin and death and into resurrection. Until then, the buck stops with them, the “world.”

11. But first the buck stops with sinners, especially as patients, most especially when they are poor, hence without modern medicine and nutrition. With the poor, of course, tumors and bacteria have a better chance of being saved. But not the patients. What kind of cosmic salvation is that?
12. Ultimately, not even rich sinners can afford the price of salvation, the loss of themselves. Here Christian soteriology proposes an alternative. On a crucifix at home we have stuck a home-made label, one which upstages Pontius Pilate's "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews." Ours is Harry Truman's desk motto, "The buck stops here."
13. Now to a specific case of Jesus' healing, Lk. 17:11-19, his "healing of the ten lepers" as it is often mis-titled. I say mis-titled because, strictly speaking, he "healed" or "saved" only one of the ten lepers. The other nine he did not, could not. That is the disjunction, namely, between the nine and the one.
14. True, all ten of the lepers "were made clean," as they themselves discovered. (v.14) (The Greek is a verb from which we get our word "catharsis.") In other words, all were cured of the leprosy, observably enough to rate a clean bill of health also from the medical-religious authorities.
15. But only one of the ten who were "made clean" is said to have been "healed," and then only when Jesus pronounces him so. What is it that Jesus sees in him that distinguishes him from all the rest as alone "healed" (or "saved" or "made whole" or "made well"?)
16. [There is no no. 16 in Bob's text.]
17. The leper himself may or may not have recognized that he was as improved as Jesus saw. But there is definitely one thing which only Jesus identifies as the cause of his healing. "Your faith has made you well" (or "saved" you).

(v.19) We have only Jesus' word for that, no clinical proof, no double-blind tests, no peer review.

18. Let those who are interested in "alternative medicine," particularly in its faith healing, not be too quick to equate that with the faith of this tenth leper. Recall, the other nine lepers too were cured medically, but their cure was not credited to anything like faith in the Lukan sense. Maybe for them Jesus was a placebo. Whatever works!
19. That is a circular understanding of faith: healing faith is faith that heals. We do better to examine what the Lukan Jesus means by "faith" if instead we connect it with something else in the story, not first with its medical, somatic effects but with its effect, of all things, upon God.
20. Luke says that the leper upon being cured "gave glory to God." (vv. 15, 18) (NRSV under-translates that merely as he "praised" or "gave praise" to God.) The leper actually "gave" God something which God did not have before, not in the person of this leper, something which God must have in order to be God: "glory," here in this world.
21. "Glory" might just as well be spelled glow-ry. The glory of God is God glowing, facially. It is God beaming like a doting parent, "making his face to shine upon you." (Nu. 6:25) Biblically, that glow is always something quite visible, empirical, open (shall we say) to peer review. It shows.
22. Where does the glow of the fond parent show? Where else but in the face of the child so doted upon. In response she glories, revels, basks in her being loved, for all the world to see. The glory of God is as inter-personal, as reciprocal, as dialogical, as inter-facial as that. The leper who "glorifies" God is God's own radiance once removed.
23. That is "faith", the leper's reflex of God's "mercy."

(v.13) Where had God shown mercy on him, quite empirically? He knows exactly where. He heads back to Jesus. There “he prostrated himself at Jesus’ feet, and thanked him.” (v.16) Mercy meets itself coming back. God (in Jesus) reappears in his “image,” the leper (Gn. 1:27)

24. But the leper’s saying thank-you, isn’t that just good manners, giving credit where credit is due? Perhaps, but that noisily? (v.15) Breaching ethnic barriers to do it? (“He was a Samaritan.”) Flat on his face? That sounds more like doxology, “giving glory [DOXA] to God” – giving glory back to God where God had shone it first.
25. The dialogue isn’t over yet. Jesus’ reply to the leper’s thank-you is no mere, polite “You’re welcome.” Typically, Jesus’ beneficiaries’ first response is to distance themselves from him, face down. But Jesus’ counter-response is to raise them back up as his equals. “Get up,” he tells the leper, “and go on your way.” (v.19)
26. And now the climactic punch-line, “Your faith has healed [or saved] you.” (v.19) Jesus returns the leper’s compliment. Indeed he addresses him as one would address deity, crediting something in the leper himself, his “faith,” as the thing which endears him to God. (Here squeamish Christians squirm.) But notice, faith in whom?
27. That whole dialogue, from the leper’s cry for mercy to Jesus’ “reckoning his faith as righteousness” (Gn. 15:6) is what we mean by salvation. See, there was no saving the sinner without already saving, beginning to, his world as well – both his interfaces at once, with Creator and creation. The cost to the leper? Temporary loss of face, of self.
28. By contrast with the other nine, see what this one leper was saved FROM: not just from leprosy but (dare we say it?) from God – God’s glower versus God’s glow. See what he was restored TO: not just to “normal,” as medicine

defines health, but to junior deity. See HOW he was saved, not from death but through it, by way of Another's.

29. Yet the whole point of this second battery of theses was to concede, with deepest regret, that what distinguishes the tenth leper's "salvation" also disjoins him from the mere "cure" of his nine fellows. That disjunction is too painful to talk about here, though sometime we should, God granting time.
30. In the Lukan account there is no mistaking the disappointment in Jesus' question, "Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they? Was none of them found to return and give [glory] to God except this foreigner?" (v.18) Bully for Number Ten. But only one out of ten? Who wouldn't be disappointed? Surely no God who is human.

The Crossings Six-Steps and World Religions.

Colleagues,

Marie and I are getting ready to move to an "old folks home" before summer's over. Nowadays it's a "retirement community," yet still populated by old folks. So it's purge, purge, purge to move into one-half the living space. Also purge, purge, purge those filing cabinet drawers. What strange and wonderful things one finds! Here's one found in the file folder from a course on "Why Jesus in a World Awash with Many Religions?"

It's a handout that walks through major (so-called) world

religions and does a Crossings “six-steps” with each one of them, asking what that religion’s own diagnosis is of the human malady and its proposed good-news to bring a new prognosis for the patient just diagnosed.

E.g., according to the fundamental tenets of a specific world religion (say Buddhism) what is its diagnosis of the human malady? Step one: initial diagnosis. Step two: deeper diagnosis. Step three: final diagnosis. And then on the good-news side: What does Buddhism propose to heal the malady? Step four: healing for the final diagnosis. Step five: healing for the deeper diagnosis. Step six: healing for the initial diagnosis.

Here’s how the handout looks.

Peace & Joy!

Ed

Why Jesus? Comparative Models for the Human Problem and its Solution, Using the Crossings matrix.

I. A CHRISTIAN Model for Problem and Solution (Taken from Luke 2, the Christmas Gospel. According to Bertram’s “A Christmas Crossing.”) **THE HUMAN PROBLEM**

1. Living “in the dark.” Benighted.
2. (Deeper) “Heart” problem. “Mega” (=Luke’s own term) fear. But not fearing – nor loving, nor trusting – God.
3. (Deepest) “Root” problem, a God-problem, Lost. Lost to God in that darkness.

THE GOSPEL’S SOLUTION

4. “Glad tidings.” A SAVIOR [=a finder of the lost] “Christ the Lord – lying in a manger,” a signal of

the coming cross.

5. Joy trumps fear, a faith trusting the mangled Messiah.
6. "Glorifying and praising God," originally the angels' job, now carried out by shepherds as sub-angels of the Messiah.

Question: Why Jesus needed here? To heal the root-problem (#3) which then brings healing to everything else.

II. A HINDU Model for Problem and Solution **PROBLEM**

1. People create suffering: for self and others. Past bad karma brings more suffering.
2. Desires in the heart cause suffering.
3. Imprisoned by karma, by the endless cycle of reincarnation (samsara).

HINDUISM'S SOLUTION

4. Salvation is escape from karma, from samsara. Complete escape = Nirvana, into nothingness.
5. Getting insight into the "big picture" (1,2,3,4). Committing one's heart to escape, to kill desire.
6. Practicing escape in daily life. Many ways to do that. Many gods in the picture. Many sacrifices to the many gods, a daily ritual.

Why Jesus needed here? Yes, karma does rule, but the problem is worse. See #3 in Christian model. The soul does not escape God's criticism. Good and New: Christ conquers karma, also God's criticism coming via karma.

III. A BUDDHIST Model for Problem and Solution **PROBLEM**

1. People create suffering: for self and others. Past bad karma brings more suffering.

2. Desire in the heart to clutch the permanent causes suffering.
3. Ignorance and its results: Imprisoned by karma, by the endless cycle of reincarnation.

BUDDHISM'S SOLUTION

4. Enlightenment about 1,2,3 leads to escape from karma and samsara. Full escape = Nirvana.
5. Acquiring insight into the "big picture" (1,2,3). Commitment to escape, to kill desire.
6. Practicing detachment in daily life. Ideal life of the monk. In folk-Buddhism many gods in the picture. Making sacrifices, acquiring merit.

Why Jesus? Karma as critic, yes. Samsara the retribution. But the problem is worse. God IS present in our lived experience, both source of blessings and "final" critic. The soul is also subject to God's criticism, no self-generated escape is possible. Good and New: Christ conquers karma, also God's criticism. Christ liberates people to trust God, join God to participate in the world's suffering, not escape it. A good and new enlightenment: call it "the Mind of Christ."

IV. A MUSLIM Model for Problem and Solution

1. Daily life lived contrary to the Qur'an, contrary to Allah's revealed will.
2. Heart not submitted to Allah. Not striving to follow Allah's revealed will.
3. Lost, Damned. Allah, though also sometimes merciful, never ceases to be critic. Mercy is never sure.

ISLAM'S SOLUTION

4. Allah reveals his will via Muhammad in the Qur'an. Salvation is: "Obey this," Allah's final word.

5. Submission to Allah's revealed will: Striving.
Either because of fear of #3, or faith in #4.

6. Living in obedience to Allah's revealed will. Doing
the 5 pillars, believing the 6 doctrines.

Why Jesus? The problem is even worse. Striving for righteousness is the problem, not the solution. Needed is liberation from striving, and from God's critique of strivers. Good and New: Jesus, compassionate Rescuer – sent from Allah! Swaps with sinners, takes the heat of God's critique. Easter says: God approves the deal – no divine critique for Christ-trusters. Christ says: Trust me (New #4). Christ-trust replaces striving (New #5). "Obeying" Christ (New #6).

Gay is OK. An Argument from the Lutheran Confessions. What!?

Colleagues,

In the run-up to the ELCA's assembly 4 years ago, USA TODAY's issue of July 09, 2007 carried an article with the teasing title: "When it comes to gays, 'What would Luther do?'" It was written by Mary Zeiss Stange, a professor of women's studies and religion at Skidmore College in Saratoga Springs, N.Y.

Prof. Stange's opening statement is this: "Given the way he dealt with issues of his day, the father of the Protestant Reformation very well may have seen the same-sex arguments in a

more accepting light.”

She bases her case on Luther’s theology of creation, which in my opinion is the only right place to start. Human biology, human psycho-soma stuff, is in the realm of God’s left hand, God’s work as creator, the turf of the first article of the creed. For Luther the theology of creation does not start at Genesis chapter one. It starts with me. Listen to his words. What does the first article of the Apostles Creed mean? First sentence: “I believe that God has made me linked together with all creatures.” And then it goes on to laundry-list all the “givens” that make me ME Though not on that list, one of those God-givens is indeed my sexual self and self-consciousness.

Granted, Luther would have been surprised by Rick Gaugert’s statement to me years ago that got me thinking in ways I never did before: “Ed, I’m wired different from you. God created me gay.” That came once in a Crossings course I was teaching. It was Rick’s own personal conclusion after years and years of trying everything to become un-gay to he could be a pastor in the LCMS. All the way through the Missouri “system” of prep school, senior college, seminary—where Rick was a whizkid at every stage on the way. But at the end of his seminary years he did not qualify for ordination. He was “wired different.”

Pious Missouri Synid kid, he too had interiorized—with a vengeance—all those killer-passages in the Bible about himself. But one day, so he told me, Christ set him free to say: “God created me this way. My gayness is God-given. I’m called to stop fighting it. I’m actually fighting against God. Whatever those abomination passages in the Bible are talking about, they are not talking about me. God made me gay.”

So it’s theology of creation as the place to start.

Stange grants that the question [Would Luther . . . ?] “is

nonsensical, of course, because in his time the concept of 'sexual orientation,' was unknown." It was also unknown in the times of the OT and NT. [Equally unknown till modern times, for example, was the incredible baby-machine God created in a woman's body. Fathers got all the credit with the erroneous notion that it was in the male semen where the marvel/mystery lay and mothers were merely the empty field where the seed was planted. All wrong, of course, but for centuries (millennia?) that's what seemed to make sense. At least to guys.]

Who today doubts that our human understanding of God's creation evolves(!) as time rolls on. That does not damage the theology of creation: "I believe that God made me and has given me" all the specs of my personal life. In that evolving comprehension of specs of creation, the marvel, mystery, the "wow!" of the universe is not diminished. Fact is, it increases. Think of those photos from the Hubble telescope. How might Luther, Paul, the Psalmist have responded to light-years, galaxies, stars being born? Unthinkable for them, but thinkable for us, yet no less mysterious. The issue, of course is not their response, but ours.

Ditto for the mystery of human anatomy. My cardiologist (an orthodox Jew), tells me almost every time I'm in his office that though he is a superstar expert in the electro-muscular mechanics of this fist-sized pump, he doesn't understand the mystery of the human heart. He points at the detailed pictures on the wall, and occasionally gets doxological. "Why should it be like that? I don't know, but that's how God created it. Aren't you glad?"

Human sexuality is under that same creation-mystery umbrella. And homosexuality seems to contradict what looks like common sense. Why should it be like that?

Here's a parallel that makes sense to me. Look at the "negative-matter," and "negative-energy," "particles and anti-particles" which we now know—well, today's physicists do—infiltrate the universe, "contradicting" what we've always(?) understood to be the way things are. [Wikipedia says: "negative matter violates one or more energy conditions and shows some strange properties such as being repelled rather than attracted by gravity." And again "Can a region of space contain less than nothing? Common sense would say no; the most one could do is remove all matter and radiation and be left with vacuum. But quantum physics has a proven ability to confound intuition, and this case is no exception. A region of space, it turns out, can contain less than nothing. Its energy per unit volume – the energy density – can be less than zero."]

It "confounds our intuition" that some males and some females would not be drawn to each other "by nature.". And therefore that male-drawn-to-male and female-drawn-to-female is indeed "contrary to nature." Ditto for the biblical writers. But the larger picture of human "nature" that God the creator has unfolded (for us nowadays earthlings) shows that not only do opposites attract, but in some cases "sames" attract. Common sense, "our intuition," used to say: the genitals are where the sexual "orientation" is to be found. Now we know that it's in the human brain—a mystery mini-universe if there ever was one. And that for some people—for reasons as mysterious, as unknown, as negative energy and negative matter, as why the human heart works the way it does, yes, how such a pump ever comes into existence!—that the human brain for some of God's human creatures gives an opposite message to what the lower anatomy proclaims.

None of this is talking about theological ethics. It's theology of creatio n. God the creator's on-going left-hand at work in the world we live in.

Stange does not elaborate on creation theology as I have above. Her article is newspaper-editorial-short. But she nudged me into going down this path. Here's how far she herself goes:

"Luther had plenty of bad things to say about the scourge of 'Sodomites' in 16th century Germany. Like his role model Paul, Luther was a product of the social prejudices [EHS addendum, the biological understanding] of his time and culture: a time when the concept of homosexuality as an 'orientation' or a 'lifestyle' were still unheard of. But would the man whose break from Roman Catholicism involved a revolutionary rethinking of the role of sexuality in human relationships take such a negative view of homosexuality today? Most probably, given the way his theological mind worked, he would not."

Nor—possibly surprise! surprise!—would the Augsburg Confession. Remember, neither Stange nor I are claiming that Luther or the Augsburg Confession were pro-gay. That would simply “confound their intuition.” But their theological understanding of human sexuality, which surfaces when they unload their critique of coerced celibacy in the church of their day, is the same as Rick Gauger’s words “God wired me this way.” Granted, ML/Augsburg’s intuition saw only one sort of wiring. They didn’t know that the Master Electrician “wired” with two different kinds of circuits. Let’s say God wired some humans “AC” and some “DC,” namely, “Alternates-Connect” and “Dittos-Connect.”

Their intuition about biology was that God wired in only one way, AC. But they were insistent that coerced celibacy for humans whom God has so wired, and never permitting them to turn on the switch, was contradicting the Creator. Coerced celibacy = clear act of unfaith in the first article of the Christian Creed. Well, then how about those whom God has wired DC? Why not?

Listen to the prose in the Augsburg Confession:

∴.

First off, that teasing line from the very end of the very last article of the confession (28):

“The apostles commanded that one should abstain from blood, etc. Who observes this prohibition now? Imagine author Philip Melanchthon possibly munching on a Blutwurst sandwich as he wrote this!] Those who do not observe it commit no sin, for the apostles did now wish to burden consciences with such bondage, but forbade such eating for a time to avoid offense. In connection with the decree one must consider what the PERPETUAL AIM OF THE GOSPEL is.”

[Question: Do the “apostles’ commands,” those stern words about DC-wired humans (appearing only a few times in the NT, never from Jesus’ mouth, only in St. Paul’s epistles) come under this same Augsburg rubric: “Those who do not observe it commit no sin”? If not, why not?

For the following Augsburg Confession reasons, I think they do. Once more, remember that this is all about AC-wiring, the operating “intuition” about human sexuality in the Middle Ages.

Art. 27 on Monastic Vows:

“God’s creation . . .drive(s) people into marriage. Consequently those who comply with this command and institution of God do not sin.” The constant thesis is: God created humans with AC sexuality. Marriage is the place for the switch to be turned on. Sexual intimacy is God’s engineering.

Celibacy is never commended—unless the Creator has bestowed a “special gift” (itself a case of anti-matter?) as the Creator occasionally does. If this is valid for people whom God has

created AC, why not for those created DC?

The Roman Catholic response to this Augsburg claim in article 27 went pyrotechnic. So does Melancthon in his reply thereto. So the Apology (=defense) for article 27 has a few of its own bursting shells. But apart from the fireworks, listen to these lines;

First off, they distinguish between sex and sin. Not the same stuff. "Genesis teaches that human beings were created to be fruitful and that one sex should desire the other sex in a proper way. Now we are not speaking about concupiscence, which is sin, but about the desire which was to have been in our primal nature . . . call[ed] natural affection. This love of one sex for the other is truly a divine ordinance. However, since the order of God cannot be suspended without an extraordinary act of God, it follows that the right to contract marriage cannot be removed by statutes."

"Just as the nature of the earth [example given is Gen1:11 – "plants bearing seeds"] cannot be changed by human laws, so neither can human nature be changed by vows or by human law. . . ."

"This creation [humans as sexual] in the human creature is . . . a matter of natural law. Since natural law cannot be changed, the right to contract marriage cannot be removed by human laws. .[Male-female attraction] is a structure divinely stamped upon [human] nature."

"We are not speaking about concupiscence (which is sin), but about that desire which they call natural affection and which concupiscence has not removed from [human] nature."

"God wants us to use the common law of nature which he has instituted. For God does not want what he has ordained and what

he has created to be despised.”

For both virginity and for those “married persons [engaging] in conjugal duties . . . all are taught to serve faithfully with their own gift while maintaining that by faith they receive forgiveness of sins on account of Christ and that by faith they are accounted righteous before God.”

“Superstitious opinions about celibacy must be constantly resisted in the church.”

Turning the “gift” of celibacy into a “law of celibacy . . . is ‘the teaching of demons.’”

Because of this view of sex “we know we are laying ourselves open to schism. ...But our consciences are very much at ease since we know that while we most earnestly want to establish harmony, it is not possible to please our opponents without casting aside the clear truth.”

“The pontifical law concerning perpetual celibacy . . . conflicts with divine and natural law It is superstitious and very dangerous, and finally, the entire thing is a fraud. The real purpose of the law is not religion, but domination, for which religion is just a wicked pretext. Neither can sane people bring anything forward against these very firmly established arguments. The gospel allows marriage for those who need it. Nevertheless, it does not compel those to marry who can be continent, provided they are truly continent. We believe this freedom should also be conceded to priests.”

What about those grim passages in the book of Leviticus? “The Levitical regulations about uncleanness must not be transferred to us. The Gospel frees us from these Levitical regulations.”

Now then, re-read all the citations above and substitute “wired

DC" for all the "AC-wirings" that these texts are working with.
And what do you get?

If/when you can grant that Rick Gaugert was speaking the truth:
"Ed, I'm wired different from you. God made me gay," doesn't he
have the primal Lutheran confessional document on his side?

I think so.

Peace and joy!

Ed Schroeder

Faith-Statements from Young Confirmands (revisited)

Colleagues,

Few weeks back [ThTh 676] you received a Thursday post about the
personal confessions of young confirmands, one of whom was our
grandson. One of whom put God's promise into the center of his
faith statement. For more details
check <https://crossings.org/thursday/2011/thur052611.shtml>

Responses have come in. Here are some of them.

Peace and joy!

Ed Schroeder

ELCA Pastor

Well, your comments on the Confirmands' Faith Statements struck

a nerve! I've tried to help them get the "necessity of Christ", the "sweet swap of faith", good old St. Paul in Galatians, and Luther's Small Catechism. But it doesn't work. At least it doesn't seem to work. By the time they go home to put the "finishing" touches on their faith statement, by the time their parents have rewritten it for them and finally have it the way the parents want it, by the time they are steeped in the moral religiosity of this world—Christ gets edited out of their confession of faith. On Confirmation Sunday I just shake my head and the rest of the congregation applauds. Heck, their parents are usually in worse shape—lifelong Lutherans who keep trusting in their own works, self-improvement projects and being nice. I guess I just hope, pray and continue to work in the proclamation of the Gospel that the Spirit will use the means of grace to create faith where and when the Spirit wills.

If anybody has any ideas on how to improve Confirmation—I'm all ears.

Retired LCMS pastor. [Aka founder of Bread for the World]

Ed, your suggestions for confirmation instruction are amazingly perceptive, and I wonder why we haven't been doing it that way for centuries. I confess with shame that my own confirmation instructing would have been immeasurably better. Why not turn this into an article for The Lutheran or some other journal to spread the idea?

A Voice from the Twin Cities, Minnesota.

Brother Ed, you are stuck operating from an assumption with little basis in liturgical theology, and so the task is bound to be frustrating – if not downright heretical. Confirmation is, in

the words of one liturgical historian, a rite in search of a theology. The basis premise – never stated boldly, of course – is that baptism doesn't quite do what it says; we need an add-on – or better, adds-on. So we have instruction on first communion (as though one can “understand” the real presence and/or communion in holy things with holy one).

And so, confirmation was rescued from the ash heap where Lutherans ought to have left it. We are left with a ministry which seeks to make would-be confirmands “feel it” (what's “it”? welcome? personally warm? close to Jesus?). I was told by the shapers of confirmation ministry at our congregation that intellectual content was not important; the kids needed to “connect.” Let's not drive them away, I was told, with unrealistic expectations and boring (to the confirmation instructors, including the then-pastor) church-y stuff.

I fear that your very good outline is wasted except on those of us who already agree with you, for the ministry of confirmation “on the ground” is not really about the faith – it's about religion (to use the Blessed Barth's distinction). We cannot “judge” each other's faith and so we cannot judge each other's talk about faith. We in the Church are so desperate – er, happy – to have the kids involved at all (if only up through the Rite of Confirmation), that we don't want to tromp their delicate egos and utter creativity with anything approaching a dogmatic boot.

The sad thing is that kids would really, I think, get into discussions of soteriology and Christology (perhaps not using those exact words) if they were invited by confirmers who themselves had any insight into them beyond the pious platitude. Kids of confirmation age are the world's best skeptics, speculators, philosophizers – I remember this from “my days” and from my experience. They would rabidly enter into the world of

good theology if they were given a chance.

You refer to yourself as a curmudgeon. Sorry, Brother, but I have that title sewn up in spades!

A retired math prof.

My experience with Valparaiso University students, four to eight years older and not necessarily much changed by their Theology education, is that their faith statements might not be much different. And I kind of wonder whether the faith statements of most of their parents, and of their pastors, would be much different.

Partly it might be because of our emphasis on a God who is not distant. Partly it might be because of our desire to “make faith something active in our lives.”

Both of those could be called laudable. BUT

Both of those, coupled with a moral development that hasn't yet progressed much beyond the stage of “There is right and wrong, and it's knowable which is which, and it's always black and white, even if I myself don't always know which is which,” would produce the kind of “faith” that believes the role of God is to help us to be good people. It's curb-and-rule Law, not Gospel. And yes, it's our American civic religion, or at least a large part of it.

I'm also pretty sure that coming right out and saying, “Our confirmation classes this year are not going to start with the Bible” might not go over very well, even with a straightforward explanation. Lots of people in our congregations have knees that jerk in rhythm with those of any Bible thumper you care to mention. But I think your curriculum would be very helpful to

these kids, and to their parents and their pastors, as they try to tease out just what this “faith” thing is that we keep talking about.

A church sign in town recently showed the following: If God is your co-pilot, maybe you should switch seats.

Another voice from the Twin Cities.

Ed, I thought this was pretty interesting. The last two times I have attended my niece/nephew’s confirmation, where they have the students give their faith statements before the church service, I was actually quite relieved that most of them “got it.” But they were products of a Missouri Synod day school with an LCMS pastor as their confirmation instructor.

It does not surprise me in an age where so few parents, much less young people, seem to have any relationship with God that their parents and mentors would be focused on making sure that they had SOME relationship with God for coming times of trouble, and perhaps figure that these youngsters haven’t had to seriously confront “real” sin enough to make the Lutheran confession meaningful to them. That is perhaps a result of our cheapening and limiting the way in which we conceive of sin, i.e., to criminal activity or its equivalent. Even from a moral standpoint that’s scary of course—if it is not a sin to let children starve in Africa or Minneapolis, or gossip against your neighbor, or to extort the highest price out of a poor person for a good you sell, then we have a pretty rotten society (as we do.) And then there’s the next (and real) level—the self-justification built into that now narrowed definition of sin—yikes. I confess it as much as the next person, but not to understand at all that you are doing it . . . aaugh!

All of which suggests that teaching the faith takes a village. As a single always scrambling mother, I'm well aware of my shortcomings bringing up my own children in this regard, and both of my kids attended LCMS or Covenant Church schools where I think they heard the real deal fairly regularly. I worry what will happen with my grandsons who don't have that. But, I realize that's pinning my hopes in the wrong place, isn't it.

Leaving One Denomination to Find a Pure One

Colleagues,

Steve Petty, one of our Crossings crowd, is a member of an ELCA congregation in Iowa. He recently (5/14/2011) told me this: "Some folks in our congregation are looking for other denominational connections. They've sent this statement (attached) to our members. I'm hoping that you, Ed – making clear the GREAT distinction of law and gospel to fellow Lutherans – would set the congregation on a right course of action."

Below is the statement from the unhappy campers in Steve's congregation. After that comes my response to him. I didn't think I could fulfill this desire that I "set the congregation on a right course of action." Nevertheless, as you would expect, I did say something.

Peace and Joy!

Ed

7 Issues and Concerns about the ELCA

1. The Authority of Scripture: – Pastor Mark Hanson, Presiding Bishop of the ELCA, stated that there are two competing hermeneutics – or ways of interpreting the Bible – in the ELCA. The first is the traditional, orthodox view that considers the Bible to be the final authority on faith and life in the church. The second is to contextualize the meaning of what the Bible says, seeing it as conditioned by the time and culture in which it was written, and turning to current theories of sociology, psychology, and personal experience to revise much of what it says.
2. The Naming of God: – There is a movement in the ELCA to move away from the use of the Trinitarian name of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In the new Evangelical Lutheran Worship hymnal, this is now only one option among others to be used in referring to God. One can go through an entire worship service without ever invoking the name of “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.” In the recent “Rite of Reception” service held in San Francisco July 25, 2010 to receive onto the roster of the ELCA 6 pastors who were previously barred from the ministry because they would not abide by the church’s prohibition against practicing homosexual pastors, the service included prayers to “God, our Mother” and “Sophia, Wisdom, and Mother of us all”. The congregation was also given several options to use for “The Prayer of Jesus” (Lord’s Prayer), one of which began, “Our Mother who is within us, we celebrate your many names. Your wisdom come, your will be done, unfolding from the depths within us.” Whereas such types of worship have been present in some churches in the ELCA for some time, this was an official service of the Sierra Pacific Synod

and included the participation of 3 ELCA bishops. And there has been no word of correction or rebuke or even mild concern expressed by any other bishop or official of the ELCA.

3. The Lutheran Understanding of Sin: – The Task Force on Human Sexuality stated that they could not come to an agreement on the nature of sin. This was not a statement disagreeing on what particular acts are sinful, it was an admission that they could not agree on what constitutes sin itself.
4. Who Jesus Is: – There is no agreement in the ELCA on whether one needs to believe in Jesus for salvation. In the ELCA “Lutheran Study Bible” published by Augsburg, the original note accompanying Matthew 28:16 – 20, the Great Commission from Jesus, in which Jesus says, “Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations,” explains this by stating, “That does not mean make everyone disciples. Most people who are helped by Jesus and believe in him never become disciples. Jesus includes in salvation people who do not believe in him or even know about him.”
5. What is the purpose of the Church: – The revisionists emphasize that the church is a “public church” whose task is to be an agent for social change seeking to bring about justice in the world. The issue of the church being involved in society has taken over the importance of the sacramental ministry of the church, rather than choosing wisely the few issues to which it speaks and then do so compellingly from its own moral teachings.
6. Virgin Birth: – A recent article on the ELCA website states that “the virgin birth isn’t as important as believing in the resurrection, but it’s still the official position of the ELCA”, portraying this doctrine of the church, which is confessed in the creeds of the church, as an optional teaching. What is next to be chipped away by

the ELCA leadership? [This distressing article was finally removed from the ELCA website as of Mon. Nov 8, 2010 – without comment – nonetheless it was on the ELCA website for over two years].

7. Marriage: – The issue of homosexuality is really the issue of God's intention and desire to create boundaries around sexuality for our protection and for the benefit of children. Those boundaries are that sexual relations belong within a committed, covenant relationship, i.e. marriage, between one man and one woman.

Dear Members of _____ Lutheran Church,

As a group of concerned members (now formally called GOSPL) we would like to share our concerns about the direction of the ELCA. Most of you are aware of the decisions that were passed at the 2009 Church Wide Assembly. As controversial as those decisions have been, we have been informed about other actions by the ELCA that are as much or more concerning than those decisions. We feel these decisions and actions do not support the Biblical teaching we have grown to appreciate here at St _____.

At this year's annual meeting, our congregation voted in favor to join an organization called Lutheran CORE (Coalition for Renewal). Lutheran CORE is an association of individuals, congregations, and renewal groups. It is not a church body. On January 18th, 2011 Pastor _____, a pastor from the Old East and Old West Point Churches in the Northeast Iowa Synod and a spokesperson for CORE, came to educate us (the congregation) about CORE and what their beliefs/goals are. If you would like to view his presentation, it is available on DVD from the church office. During his presentation he educated us about 7 Issues and Concerns about the ELCA (see the enclosed letter), that we would like to share with you. Please take time to read the

enclosed letter, and after doing so, take some time to reflect on how you feel about those seven issues.

Pastor _____ has graciously offered to receive any questions/concerns you might have about CORE through email correspondence. His email address is xxxxxxxx. He will be undergoing some surgery during the first of May, so please be patient while waiting for his reply.

If you have any thoughts/concerns about this letter please feel free to contact the following:

[25 names]

The following people also share our concerns:

[Seven names]

Steve, I think I am incapable of doing what you wish—"set the congregation on a right course of action." From the rhetoric of "their" statement it seems clear to me that it is a "lost cause" to try to move them away from their Biblicist legalism with paper statements about each of their 7 pts. Sadly.

The problem of Biblical legalists is that they are trusting an "other" Gospel instead of the one offered by the crucified and risen Jesus. And linked with that "other Gospel" is this "other" notion of salvation: Salvation is granted by God when you are "faithful" to the Bible, believing and doing everything it says.

That is a different "faith" and "Salvation" from what the Bible itself actually proposes, of course. Never once does the Bible say: Saving faith = believing every word of this book. Its core message is what Paul told the terrified Philippi jailer:

"Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved."

It's that simple. Nowhere in the Bible does the Bible say "Believe the Bible."

So this form of Biblicist/Legalism is of the same sort of religion as Islam. "Believe and practice everything in the book." Their book is the Quran. For these folks in your congregation—lost in the desert of Biblicist legalism— THE BOOK is the Bible.

They are hanging their hearts on the Bible as their God. This is not only deserting Christ, it's breaking the first commandment.

Only when this false faith is replaced by "the real thing," a faith focused exclusively (no addenda) on Christ, only then would it be fruitful to talk with them about the seven gauntlets they are throwing down in their statement.

So it seems to me.

Then it might be useful to talk about their statement and help them see the false-faith, misfocused faith, that runs through it.

- 1. The Authority of Scripture: – There is a Biblicist way and a Jesus-focused way to speak of Scripture's authority. Within the ELCA and within CORE and within in the NALC there are folks who get it right and folks who get it wrong. All these three, all denominations in the USA, are a mixed bag on this.*
- 2. The Naming of God: – There are dingbats in all denominations, ELCA included, who waffle on this. From what I know of this waffling it's linked again to what people proclaim as the hub of the wheel of faith. The*

trinitarian formula Father, Son and Holy Spirit is the ancient church's language for keeping faith focused on the Christ-center. That's how they unpacked the formula. That's the way Luther unpacked the Trinitarian formula in his Large Catechism: "Trinity = the way to talk about God so that it comes out as Good News, aka Gospel." It's still good today. It's also what the ELCA's constitution professes.

- 3. The Lutheran Understanding of Sin. The ELCA is committed (in its constitution) to this definition: "[Our churches] teach that since the fall of Adam all human beings who are propagated according to nature are born with sin, that is, without fear of God, without trust in God, and with concupiscence. And they teach that this disease or original fault is truly sin, which even now damns and brings eternal death to those who are not born again through baptism and the Holy Spirit. They condemn the Pelagians and others who deny that the original fault is sin and who, in order to diminish the glory of Christ's merits and benefits, argue that human beings can be justified before God by their own powers of reason." [Augsburg Confession, Article II, (1530). When the Roman Catholic critics at Augsburg rejected this definition, the confessors responded with a multi-page defense of their statement.]*
- 4. Who Jesus Is: – The ELCA constitution is clear on this. There are dingbats in all denominations that waffle here too. In everything I have read/heard from Bishop Mark Hanson, he is not a waffler.*
- 5. What is the purpose of the Church: -The ELCA constitution is "perfectly clear" on this. Sure, there are folks who don't practice this. True of all denominations. Also in the LCMS. There are no perfect denominations—anywhere in the world. Ditto for the CORE folks and the NALC. To seek*

to create a “pure” denomination is to make a denomination into one’s God. Clear idolatry. Jesus was agin such a notion.

- 6. Virgin Birth: – There is the Biblicist way and the Christ-the-center way to address this one. That would take a larger essay to work out the details.*
- 7. Marriage: – “The issue of homosexuality is really the issue of God’s intention and desire to create boundaries around sexuality for our protection and for the benefit of children.”*

NOT TRUE. Seems pretty plain to me that the “issue” – the deeper, possibly deepest, issue – in your congregation is the conflict between two different ways of reading the Bible: Biblicist-legalist or “Christ-the-center.” And then the Bertram axiom comes into play, namely, that Biblical hermeneutics and Biblical soteriology are two sides of the same coin. One is real gold. The other isn’t. It may look shiny (=pious), but it is not reflecting “the true light, which enlightens everyone.”

So it seems to me.

Cheers!

Ed

Proclaiming the Good News

Colleagues,

[Here’s one that’s been in the hopper for a while. Since February, I think. It never went out into cyberspace for reasons

I can no longer remember. So it comes your way now.]

Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder

Marie and I spent most of February this year “down south” from Alabama to Florida where temperatures were 80 degrees Fahrenheit. Returning to the heartland, it was still not spring and temps were in the thirties. On the three Sundays we were away we were in three different states, attending worship at three Lutheran congregations (one LCMS, two ELCA)—all of them under the pastoral care of my own former students.

Preaching THE Gospel is not an easy task. Made even more of a challenge on those three Sundays when all the sermon texts came from Matthew 5 and 6, Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, where he radicalizes, interiorizes—and finally, “impossible-izes”—any human attempt to fulfill God’s law. Yes, there are clues within Jesus’ own three-chapter sermon about a “better” righteousness, better than the defective one that comes with legal performance. But you have to be alert to hear those signals, and it takes work to get them out in the open and into the prominence that Matthew’s overall Gospel commends. Makes me think of Melanchthon’s drumbeat in Apology IV of the Lutheran Confessions: “It is not enough to preach the law . . . it is necessary to add the Gospel promise.” [Again] “The preaching of the law is not enough . . . the preaching of the Gospel must be added.” [Again] “Over and over again we say that the Gospel of Christ must be added to the preaching of the law.”

That might lead one to conclude: So why bother preaching law at all? Here’s why: If the patient is convinced he’s not sick, he won’t take any medicine. Law-preaching in Reformation pastoral praxis is not fire-and-brimstone. Rather it is careful diagnosis

of the patient's de facto malady, taking your signals from a Biblical text to get to the bottom, to the God-problem, at the root of it all. There, and only there, is the promise of the crucified and risen One the therapy, the healing, that works. With shallow diagnosis, this depth-remedy is useless. With accurate depth diagnosis, but some other remedy applied, the patient stays stricken, "stripped, beaten, left half dead."

Fred Danker likes to tweak folks by telling them "There is no New Testament Greek verb for 'preach.'" When translations use the word "preach," they are trying to cope with the sticky wicket that in NT Greek the writers take the two major "good news" NOUNS—euaggelion and kerygma, the gospel and the message—and simply make VERBS out of them. They never say "preach the Gospel," or "preach the message." Instead they say: "gospel-ize" and "message-ize." To wit: "Do gospel; Do the message." So strictly speaking there never is a question for the pastor: "What should I preach about this Sunday?" When you're in the pulpit as Jesus' rep, the assignment is always: Do gospel. Do the message.

[Ditto is true about the law. Never does the NT talk about "preaching" God's law. And that's not only because there is no Greek word for "preach." Major reason is that God's law is operative even if no one ever talks about it—or even if no one notices it constantly in operation. Like the air we breathe, it's always there, even though most of the time we never even think about it. Better verbs for articulating God's law would be "identify" where it's already operating in people's lives, "turn the light on" to see what's going on—what ALL is going on—in the room of daily life "under the law." Flipping that light switch brings a double illumination, both of the law's beneficial work in sustaining the world and us in it, as well as its critical operation in evaluating our life — day in and day out.

And THEREFORE our need—in the face of the law’s unrelenting drumbeat—our dire need, to be gospel-ized, message-ized! For the Gospel is not omni-present as God’s law is. It shows up only when someone DOES it, when someone brings another SOMEONE, the crucified and now risen Christ, into that room where the light switch was turned on. But when the verbs, gospel-ize and message-ize, are not happening, the nouns themselves aren’t present either. Romans 10:14-17 is the classic text for this.]

Not too long ago Timothy Hoyer, ELCA pastor in upstate New York, sent me some reflections on his work for the Doctor of Ministry degree at an ELCA seminary. It was all about proclaiming the Gospel. It was not cheering. It signaled the “hard times” nowadays when it comes to “euaggelion-izing” and “kerygma-izing.” Even the teachers of the preachers need help when it comes to the genuine gospel, the kosher kerygma. For in the law-lit rooms where we live “other” gospels abound. Granted, they are regularly legalized gospels, wolves in sheep’s clothing. Come to think of it, the NT apostles themselves report their constant encounter with “other” gospels. Conclusion: the apostolic age continues. Proclaiming THE Gospel in the marketplace of other gospels is the way it always is. Even during Timothy’s doctoral program. So he says. Read on.

Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder

Getting my D.Min. degree with accent on preaching

Jesus died and rose from the dead. People answer, “Sure, but what does that mean? Actually, what does that mean for me?” Those who tell others of Jesus need to continually figure out how to speak of Jesus in a way that works faith in people in the midst of the many things they cling to for hope and meaning. Clinging to such things is their way of making life

work.

Everybody has a way to describe how life works for them. "Life sucks." "Just do it." "Family means everything to me." A bumper sticker reads, "Work. Buy. Consume. Die."

Each of those mottos gives people a way to understand why they do things or why things (bad things) happen. Such a way gives meaning to what happens, or an explanation of what happens. We need to have meaning. For some reason, the teenage answer to why they did something, "No reason," drives us crazy. Perhaps not having a reason is chaos. Then God spoke the law, which is the reason for why things are done, or the yardstick against which we measure how much and how well we have done. Then there is meaning.

That is the only meaning we have and is in all religions, and in all "isms" (hedonism, capitalism, racism, etc.).

So at X Seminary of the ELCA, in the first class of my Doctor of Ministry in Biblical Preaching, the professor taught, "History is a different time than what we have in the now. No way to get back to past events. We regularly attach meaning to events. 'What did you do last night or at school?' You answer, 'Nothing.' Nothing means nothing significant, nothing of meaning. Different people attach different meanings to what they did. Eventually there is no certain way to decide what is important. No proof. Therefore, we can only assert or confess. When we communicate our confessions, we need a medium – a play, a movie, opera, a musical. The medium is a way to point to the meaning. Jesus is the event. Gospel is the meaning, that is, confessing who Jesus was and did. Scripture is the medium."

The Gospel, as confessed by the professor, is that Jesus is the most clear way God speaks to us and the clearest way to read Scripture. Jesus is the interpretive key. Why? His death and

resurrection are the key. Why? Because, in the example of Matthew's Gospel, it is a story with a long introduction. The plot movement is to the cross and resurrection. The movement is from death to life. When God encounters us, the pattern of events is that we realize we are not God and are vulnerable. That makes us feel out of control. To be out of control is death-like. To realize that God knows us as we really are is to die, to give up independence. But then we move from death to life. It is Jesus who died for us. Jesus loves us as we are. He invites us to come into life.

Compared to the Crossings' Diagnosis/Prognosis, faith is implied but not emphasized; and there is no God-problem because it's only the not being in control that is "death-like," which is not the same as God demanding the death of those who don't trust God. Note the difference between not trusting God and being unaware that one is not in control. Jesus is described as the clearest way God speaks to us, as if God wasn't precise enough in God's words for us to understand. Jesus is not heard as a new and good and different message, a message of promise instead of just a clearer word of law. But maybe not law, for the invitation into life, according to the professor, is not about an invitation into trusting God through Jesus, but to have a better life, to have hope instead of despair, health instead of sickness, wealth instead of poverty, friends instead of loneliness. Thus, it was not about having Jesus instead of law, mercy instead of condemnation, life with God instead of death, living by faith in Christ instead of living by one's own efforts to get things done.

That limited Gospel did not continue to get used. It was mentioned and forgotten (maybe because it was not that enticing, not more meaningful than other meanings we attach to ourselves and events). When sermons were presented in class, two per person, there never was critique about how that limited

Gospel was used, no discussion about how effective was the attachment of the limited Gospel to people and the events of their lives.

If not even that limited Gospel is used to give meaning, then some "other gospel" is used, and that other gospel is always law, always conditional, always based on what we do.

Not only did my class not use Jesus, when we heard the sermons of the people in the classes ahead of us, Jesus was not used, his death and rising were never used as the basis for our new relationship with God.

Another class was led by a professor who teaches the four-page sermon. Page one tells what trouble people in the text are having. Page two is how we are having comparable trouble. Page Three is about what grace is happening in the text. Page four is to give the hearers the same grace. To figure out what grace is happening in the text for page three and four, the question asked is, "What is God doing in the text?" The assumption was that God only does grace. As in the first class, there was no God-problem. And since the text does not contain Jesus' death and rising, the grace in the sermons was not based on Jesus and his death and rising. Also, there was the assumption that we do love God and we just need to be assured in hard times that God loves us. Which is not the same as we "are unable by nature to have true fear of God and true faith in God."

So, there was a poor diagnosis, there was a limited Gospel, and no follow-through, no asking, "How was Jesus used?" Jesus as the key to Scripture was not emphasized.

There were classes on preaching Revelation, preaching the psalms, preaching the prophets, preaching Acts, and preaching the parables of Jesus. None of those professors talked of how to better use the death and rising of Jesus in sermons based on

Revelation or the prophets or the parables of Jesus. One professor said that there is gospel in the Old Testament, in that God frees us from slavery, or that God makes us God's people and we are to have no other gods, or "The Lord your God is a great God." After hearing sermons from the class, none asked, "How was Jesus used?" There were only comments on clever stories, good images, how the text was used, and comments on public speaking skills.

When one student insisted on using the death and rising of Jesus he only got the response of, "Oh, there he goes again." That is a dismissal of what was said as not important. For a student to insist on connecting Jesus' death and rising to people through a sermon does not work in a law-based academic setting because the professor, the guest expert, is given all credence as the one to listen to, not some mild-mannered Clark Kent kind of guy.

It seems foolish to attach Jesus' death and rising to us and to what happens each day in our lives. But God has attached Jesus' death to us, to all we do, and to all that happens. This we know because God raised Jesus from the dead. The goodness of what God does for us through Jesus is that we are forgiven instead of having our unfaith counted against us. We are given life again after death instead of just nothing. We are declared good before God for Jesus' sake instead of having to earn our goodness before God, a goodness we cannot earn. We are given the Holy Spirit to be our strength, our hope, and our heart of Christ's love, the new way to relate to one another instead of loving others as we love ourselves. When anything else is used to make life better or to give it meaning or to establish a relationship with God, then Jesus is not used and he died for nothing. God does not think Jesus is nothing. God has raised Jesus from the dead.

Timothy Hoyer

P.S. from ES. In this week's e-exchange about this posting I learned this from Timothy: I have confirmation camp next week. The curriculum is given to us, as if that is a favor in that we don't have to plan anything. Just do what is written for you. Alas, it's all "God does this and God uses you and Jesus expects you to . . . " So I get to "gospel-ize" the curriculum.

Book Review – “I Am a Christian: the Nun, the Devil and Martin Luther.” Carolyn M. Schneider.

Colleagues,

Today's ThTh post is Robin Morgan's review of a book by Carolyn Schneider. After 12 years as theology professor at Texas Lutheran University, Seguin, Texas, Prof. Schneider recently sent me this note: "I have left TLU and will be spending the fall semester at the Collegeville Institute [in Minnesota], working on translating a sermon credited to Athanasius from Coptic into English. In the spring I will be going to Egypt to teach one course at the Evangelical Theological Seminary in Cairo. After that, I don't know. But I am excited about this next year." Both author Schneider and reviewer Morgan have served on the Board of Directors of the Crossings Community, Inc.

Peace and joy!

Ed Schroeder

P.S. We're moving to smaller quarters. Anyone interested in 25 years' worth of Currents in Theology and Mission? Now available for shipping costs.

"I Am a Christian: the Nun, the Devil and Martin Luther." Carolyn M. Schneider.

Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010. 184 pp. Hardcover. [Amazon price \$22.80]

Carolyn Schneider's book, "I Am a Christian: the Nun, the Devil and Martin Luther" is a historical and theological exploration of a story Luther told numerous times over a 24-year period. The story is of a faithful woman who when confronted with the demonic responds with the short confession, "I am a Christian." This story with its simple, but powerful message, was obviously significant for Luther and Schneider does an admirable job of researching and expounding that significance.

She begins by enumerating and locating all the written occurrences of the story in Luther's works. From a sermon on St. Anthony's Day to the lectures on Genesis to Table Talks over a number of years, this story in various forms was a staple of Luther's exemplar repertoire. Sometimes a nun, sometimes a young girl, sometimes an older woman, sometimes a word of advice from Luther himself, the protagonist of the story is always a faithful person standing in the face of evil proclaiming "I am a Christian."

Schneider's second chapter is probably the one of most interest to the readers of Thursday Theology. She provides an in-depth explanation of the theological importance Luther puts on the

story's confession, "I am a Christian." For students of Bob Bertram (to whose memory she dedicates this book), echoes of his phrase, "the Sweet Swap," ring in the ear as one reads these pages. For those with an academic background, but little knowledge of Lutheran theology, this chapter could be an understandable introduction to the core of Luther's thought. Schneider walks step-by-step through Luther's theology encompassed in the woman's confession. Schneider highlights Luther's emphasis on baptism as he says in the Large Catechism that baptism is "victory over death and the devil, forgiveness of sin, God's grace, the entire Christ and the Holy Spirit with his gifts." (p. 35)

Schneider also shows how Luther's theology usually leads to pastoral care: "The devil's intent is to destroy us. For, while God wants people to live, and to do so with joy, 'Satan wants our death by any means.' Judas, the disciple who betrayed Jesus, was an example for Luther of one who lost his life to the devil. As Luther understood it, Judas was attacked by the 'bright devil,' the devil's most dangerous form. This devil demands human sacrifice, either of endless self-effort or of endless repentance. Those who believe and obey the bright devil think they are fearing and honoring God. By mistaking the devil's law for God's law, they reach the point of exhaustion and cannot go on. This throws them into the struggle of faith that Luther calls ANFECHTUNG, an attack by the devil with the goal of making one despair of one's life and salvation....When he told the story of the faithful woman in the Sermon on St. Anthony (1522), Luther admired the way the virgin resisted the devil's attack by turning attention away from either her achievements or her feelings of despair, and turning it instead toward the invincible promise of salvation she received in her baptism. Thus she replaced her 'spiritual sadness' with 'spiritual happiness.'" (p. 27)

Chapter three explores the identity of the woman in the story. Though Luther sometimes left the woman nameless, often her name was some form of Mechthild. Schneider explores possible identities through the stories of the martyr Blandina, the legend of Margaret and two Mechthilds, one of Hackeborn and the other of Magdeburg. The stories of these women illuminate the way some Christian women throughout the ages have dealt with spiritual temptation, but does not bring her to a clear identity of the woman in the story. However, Schneider's search, she believes, mirrors Luther's search for words, phrases and stories to help him "express God's gracious action toward people in Christ." (p. 76)

Chapter four compares Luther's theology with that of the Mechthilds, both Hackeborn and Magdeburg. Schneider is drawing comparisons to set Luther within, or at least at the edge of, medieval affective and mystical theology. Particularly, she sees Mechthild of Magdeburg's legacy of affective theology and Christocentric mysticism along with the Friends of God movement as directly affecting Luther, largely through Tauler. Schneider uses this opportunity to draw attention to the impact these earlier women theologians had on Luther's development. She is highlighting the reality that, though Christian theology has largely been the domain of men, even those men have learned from the women who came before them. I hope to see future work by Schneider on this topic.

The most extraordinary part of this book is chapter five. Schneider takes her academic research, which is important in itself, and makes the connection to today's world. I have much respect for academics who have the courage to take this risky, but necessary next step. Many people need the examples academics can provide from their work. By making connections themselves, academics help their readers do the same in their own contexts.

Schneider begins this chapter by acknowledging the differences in the way the medieval world dealt with problems of despair and anxiety compared with the way we do in this post-Enlightenment age. We use the language of medical and psychological sciences rather than spiritual temptations. She says that “even in training for pastoral care there are no classes called How to help People Deal with the Devil.” (p. 102) To bridge this semantic divide, Schneider uses Walter Wink’s work in his “Engaging the Powers” series. “He associates this spiritual dimension of reality with the biblical ‘powers,’ such as those listed in Romans 8:38-39, 1 Corinthians 15:24-27, Colossians 2:13-15 and Ephesians 2:1-2 and 6:12.” She also cites Heinrik Berkhof, a Dutch theologian who “stressed the fact that in Paul’s theology, God created the powers good. Their purpose was to give social structure to the world and thus preserve the creation from destructive chaos. But when the powers become gods and demand worship ‘as though they were the ultimate ground of being,’ they become perverse and separate people from God. With reference to Ephesians 2:1-2, Berkhof gives the example of the warped powers of ‘Volk, race, and state’ he felt ‘in the air’ when he was studying in Berlin in 1937.” (p. 103)

Schneider goes on to explore temptations to despair within the context of familiar modern problems: depression, addictions, and self-harm, especially in the lives of women. She uses her own experiences as a volunteer helping homeless people with recovery issues, the experiences of clergy in the parish as well as psychologists to make connections between Luther’s theology and specific situations today. I found Schneider’s use of Valerie Saiving Goldstein’s groundbreaking article, “The Human Situation: A Feminine View,” particularly useful. Goldstein emphasized that temptation to passivity, not pride, is more prevalent among women. She states that theology’s emphasis on rooting out pride, though helpful for men, has “only stifled the

movements women made to develop strong selves capable of differentiated love and left them more deeply embedded in the sin of non-selfhood with its easy access to despair.” (p. 105).

Schneider concludes with an afterword in which she highlights Luther’s urging of people in his day to use the story of the faithful woman as their own. This confession, “I am a Christian,” isn’t only a confession of faith, but a powerful tool for fighting despair. Through her research and contextualizing of this story, Schneider has helped Christians today benefit from the faithful woman’s courageous claim in the face of evil.

Robin J. Morgan

22 June 2011

Robin Morgan is an On Leave From Call ELCA pastor, wife, mother, grandmother, and dog lover.

Law and Promise Reading of the Scriptures, Part III

Colleagues,

Today’s post is the final segment of a three-part monograph by Dr. Harry J. Duffey—engineering prof turned theologian in his senior years—titled: “Introduction to Law & Promise Reading of the Scriptures.” Information about the author and this essay came along with the original posting of Part One, now archived on the Crossings website <www.crossings.org> at this address <https://crossings.org/thursday/2011/thur060911.shtml> Ha

erry Duffey's e-address is <HJDuffey at aol dot com >

The three segments of the full text are as follows:

Part 1.

Introduction.

The Question.

Beginnings.

Part 2

Recovery of Law and Gospel.

Law.

Gospel.

Part 3

Biblicism.

Authority.

Conclusion.

Endnotes.

Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder

“Introduction to Law & Promise Reading of the Scriptures” Part Three:

Biblicism

Some may answer the Bertram question posed in the opening section by saying: The Bible reveals the will of God. It informs us readers of things, very important things, that we would not know apart from this revelation: what God wants us to believe (faith life) and how God wants us to behave (moral life), to worship, etc. Salvation is following the will of God by believing what God wants us to believe and behaving as God instructs us to behave. Unbelievers ignore what God reveals for us to believe. Immoral people ignore God's mandates for how we

are to behave. And where does Jesus fit in? The Gospel of Jesus is the most important thing revealed by God. And, of course, it is at the top of the list of what you ought to believe. When you believe it, you are righteous; when you don't, you aren't. And the same applies to God's moral revelation. When you behave as God tells you to behave, you are moral. When you don't, you are immoral.

A proper label for this kind of hermeneutics/soteriology (interpretation of the Scriptures/doctrine of Salvation) is "legalist Biblicism." It is not the Gospel, not the Gospel's way to read the Bible. If Law and Gospel are not clearly distinguished in reading the Scriptures, then the statement, "salvation is fundamentally linked to doing the right thing, and sin linked to doing the wrong thing," leads to the "Biblicist" way for interpreting the Bible.

Here, salvation and sin both branch from law. If you keep the law, you're good, if you break the law, you're bad— the common understanding in secular law. But sadly, that is what many Christians think and say about God's law. In Biblicism, Law and Gospel become entwined in a way that God never intended.

Christians on either side of a moral issue use the same Bible. Both sides—the pro and the con—often concur that salvation is fundamentally linked to doing the right thing, and sin linked to doing the wrong thing. The pros find ways of reading Bible passages that prove "it's okay," and the cons do likewise to prove that "it's not okay." But in both instances "doing the right thing" is the measure of what's faithful and what's not. Biblicists single out the law and through the law they seek forgiveness of sin and justification. Their reading glasses focus on law, but God's method of salvation is always a grace method.

For example, Mark 10:17-31, if not read through the Law-Gospel lens, can be interpreted as Jesus telling the Rich Man, “Your salvation depends on your doing the right thing” – straight Biblicism from Jesus, the foundation and fulfillment of the Gospel. Even the disciples, as is clear from their response, were buying the Biblicist demands for the Rich Man’s salvation (and maybe their own). Mark 10:17 begins:

As Jesus started on his way, a man ran up to him and fell on his knees before him. “Good teacher, he asked, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” “Why do you call me good?” Jesus answered. “No one is good—except God alone. . .”

The first four sentences of the story set the stage. The man falls on his knees and calls Jesus “good” – action and word that seem to indicate that the man is going to plead for mercy – a request for a Gospel response from Jesus. But instead, the man asked, “What must I do?” He continues to push Jesus for a “law response,” and a “law response” is indeed what he gets. The result is always the same after hearing the demands of the law. It causes the man to despair, to leave without hope of meeting the law’s demand for justification. After the first four sentences, the Rich Man finds that hearing the law-words of Jesus is not good news. The story continues, but the man has left the stage. The Gospel never commands; it only invites.

Authority

The Old Testament and the New Testament gain their authority for individual Christians as God’s word in the Gospel and as God’s word of Law.

The New Testament books are the only authentic source we have for what can be known about God’s revelation in human history that occurred in Christ. Why? It is only the eye- and ear-

witnesses, the apostles, who could testify authentically to what was said and done (Luke 1:2; 1 John 1:1). We today have no access to that oral testimony, but only to the written testimony they have given to us. The New Testament is the only norm for the church's entire proclamation, since the apostles themselves—once they had received the Holy Spirit promised to them by Christ—became the means for God's revelation, and because all subsequent church life and work is measured by this revelation.

The New Testament functions as norm, as a yardstick, in that all proposals for what should be proclaimed, enacted, practiced as "Christian" is measured by this test: is it congruent with Christ's original Gospel? As the one and only source and norm for what the church does, the written apostolic witness needs no supplementary additions from other witnesses. The Scriptures are sufficient, they are complete for what the Gospel is. They need no additions from tradition in order to be made more complete. There are no missing parts to the Gospel that must be supplied from other sources.

To Gentile audiences (people who had never heard of God's work in the Old Testament), the apostles did not make the validity of their witness to Christ depend on any previous acceptance of the Old Testament. This fact is significant also today for Christian mission to the nations of the world. You do not become a Christian via a two-stage process – first acknowledging the Old Testament and its authority and then coming to Christ and following him. Faith in Christ is trusting Christ's promise.

People throughout the world are promise-trusters of one sort or another. Every "other Gospel" in the world – sacred or secular – offers a promise of some sort, and then calls people to trust that promise. Christian mission at its most basic level is inviting people to let go of the promises they have been

trusting and “switch” to trusting Christ’s promise.

Faith in Christ does not call for disciples to visit Moses first before coming to Christ. Yet from the very beginning Christians did not turn away from the Scriptures of the Old Testament. The New Testament records over 250 explicit quotations of the Old Testament and many hundreds of indirect references [en 6] to it. The Christian church received the Old Testament as a normative word of God, the God of the Old Testament is also the Father of Jesus Christ, and thereby – when we are linked to Christ – the Old Testament God becomes our father, too.

In its promises, the Old Testament is testimony to Christ, foreshadowed in Isaiah 52:13 – 53:12. Yet the authority of the Old Testament in the Christian church can be understood only as a derivative from the authority of the New Testament. What the Old Testament says must be understood through the prism of what the New Testament says.

It is a misleading opinion to say that after all of Jesus’ twelve disciples died, the Church itself became the guarantor for the New Testament canon – for which books genuinely belong in the New Testament. The early church always saw itself standing under the authority of the original apostles. First, it was the authority of their oral testimony when the apostles were personally active in the church’s life, and then after their death it was the authority of their written testimony. The later church did not create the canon, they received it from the hands of the apostles.

Conclusion

The Scriptures are clear in their proclamation concerning the righteousness of God in Jesus Christ. Since that is the central item which God wants to convey to people, it does come across loud and clear. If we come to Scripture asking the kinds of

questions for which the gracious righteousness of God is the answer, then there is no problem in our getting a clear answer. If we come with any other question, then the Scriptures are indeed darkly veiled.

Now one might come to the conclusion that following these principles would lead to a very short-lived study of the Bible. Once a person had learned what the Gospel was, he would have finished. He would know it all, and that would be that.

But that is not the case with the actual Christian. This Christian, though he is God's saint, is still plagued by "saintly" sins. Now that the Christian knows Christ, the Christian needs to learn how to let both the Law and the Promise move into the Christian's life – the Law to expose those areas where sin is still thriving, the Promise to have Christ take over those areas and have them function as sectors of redeemed creation and not of the condemned old creation. Christians must be told – and that, as indicated in John 20:31, is the Scriptures' own objective – how faith comes into being, how the Holy Spirit is given, how regeneration takes place, how good works can be done. The purpose is not that they will have the right answer for the great final examination, but rather that they can have that answering happening in their own lives now.

The only reason there is a Christian church engaged in interpreting the Scriptures at all is that Christ is not buried but "is arisen" – "that we might have life in his name."

Endnotes

1. Martin Luther (1483-1546) German theologian, recognized as the lead figure in the European Reformation and noted for the doctrine of justification by faith alone in Christ alone.
2. Robert W. Bertram (1921-2003) Major voice for Law/Gospel

Lutheranism in America in the 20th century and author of "The Hermeneutical Significance of Apology IV."

3. Jerome (ca. 342-420) Biblical scholar of the early church, noted for the Latin translation of the Bible (i.e., the "Vulgate").
 4. Philipp Melanchthon (1497-1560) German theologian, lifelong friend and ally of Martin Luther, Professor of Greek and student of Luther at Wittenberg University, he systematized Luther's early works and was the author of the Augsburg Confession and Apology.
 5. Suleiman (1494-1566) Sultan of the Ottoman Empire, 1520 to 1566.
 6. Ronald F. Youngblood, "Old Testament Quotations in the New Testament," chapter 10 of "The NIV: The Making of a Contemporary Translation."
-

Law and Promise Reading of the Scriptures, Part II

Colleagues,

Today's post is part two of a three-part monograph by Dr. Harry J. Duffey—engineering prof turned theologian in his senior years—titled: "Introduction to Law & Promise Reading of the Scriptures." Information about the author and this essay came along with last week's Part One, now archived on the Crossings website <www.crossings.org> at this address <https://crossings.org/thursday/2011/thur060911.shtml>

The three segments of the full text are as follows:

Part 1.

Introduction.
The Question.
Beginnings.

Part 2

Recovery of Law and Gospel.
Law.
Gospel.

Part 3

Biblicism.
Authority.
Conclusion.
Endnotes.

Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder

“Introduction to Law & Promise Reading of the Scriptures” Part Two:

RECOVERY OF LAW AND GOSPEL

After Jerome's (c. 342-420) Latin translation of the Bible, a thousand years would pass before new translations would be written in the West. John Wycliffe, in the last part of the fourteenth century, produced the first complete English translation. Scholars in England and Europe had begun to push the gates of the medieval church open for the people to have access to the Scriptures in their own language. By the beginning of the seventeenth century the King James Version was in print along with other Bible translations in various languages of European countries. As previously stated, Bible translation is not the same as Bible interpretation. Bible translation is basically moving words from one language to another language.

Interpretation is taking those words to a what-does-that-mean understanding in my life, at my moment, and in my place.

On October 31, 1517 (All Saints Eve), Martin Luther posted his now famous “95 Theses” on the town bulletin board in Wittenberg, Germany. These statements, about practices in the Roman Church, were intended for topics of debate in the university community, as was the custom. But within weeks of Luther’s posting, his students and friends had translated the Latin postings into German, printed them, and sent them throughout Germany. The ensuing controversy caused the posting date to be referred to as the beginning of the Protestant Reformation.

Luther’s early writings and sermons produced cracks of separation between him and the Roman Church—little cracks at first that could have been bridged from either side of the dispute. Soon there appeared a major crack that opened a chasm that still exists today.

This major separation from the Roman Church was caused by Luther’s stand on “justification.” Justification was not a central teaching of the Roman Church in the early part of the sixteenth century. But for Luther, a product and priest of that Church, it WAS the central issue. He expressed it in the Biblical question: “What must I do to be saved?” Although Luther did not make a systematic presentation of his early theology, his student and colleague, Philipp Melanchthon [en#4], did in 1521 in his book Basic Theological Doctrines (English Translation). In the book, Melanchthon wrote a concise statement of Luther’s interpretation of Biblical justification:

“We are JUSTIFIED when, put to DEATH by the LAW, we are made alive again by the word of grace promised in Christ; the GOSPEL FORGIVES our sins, and we cling to Christ in faith, not doubting in the least that the righteousness of Christ is our

righteousness, that the satisfaction Christ wrought was for our expiation [atonement] and that the resurrection of Christ is ours.” [Emphasis added]

For Luther, justification is “the doctrine by which the church stands or falls.” A Biblical understanding of justification moved Luther to a Biblical understanding of Law and Gospel. Knowing how “men are to be saved” focused Luther on the Law/Gospel interpretation of the Bible—the Bertram statement above.

The words “law” and “Gospel” became “summation words” as the Reformation moved forward, the understanding being that the “law always condemns” and the “Gospel always forgives.” These definitions, these understandings, were not a 16th-century invention but were the teachings of the Scriptures from the very beginning.

From 1518, the authority, doctrine, and practices of the Roman Church were persistently tested by Luther to determine if they were centered in the Good News—the Jesus story. Luther’s persistence in these activities resulted in his excommunication on January 3, 1521, from the Roman Church by Pope Leo X. The newly crowned emperor, Charles V, although only twenty years old, knew that peace within the Empire was tied to peace with the Roman Church. Under continual pressure from influential dignitaries of State and Church, Emperor Charles signed the formal condemnation on May 26, 1521 making Luther an “outlaw” of the Empire.

Holy Roman Emperor Charles V, Pope Leo X, and Professor Doctor of Bible Martin Luther were the vertices of the triangle that enclosed the beginning events of the Reformation. Tension and conflict would exist between the three men for the remainder of their lives. (Pope Leo X died in December 1521. The order of

succession to the papacy was Adrian VI, Clement VII, and Paul III. All continued to persecute the Reformers. Luther died during the papacy of Paul III.)

Fortunately, Luther's home was in Wittenberg, a city in the principality of Saxony, a region in medieval Germany ruled by the Elector of Saxony. Under the complicated political system of the time, Saxony, although in the Holy Roman Empire, was under the jurisdiction of the Elector. The Elector, Frederick III, protected Luther from the consequences of being an "outlaw" as long as he remained in Frederick's territory.

In 1530, Emperor Charles V summoned representatives of both the official Roman Church and the Protestors to appear at an assembly to be held in Augsburg, Germany. Charles' hope was to re-direct the attention/tension from the religious factions to that of defending The Holy Roman Empire against the Muslim armies under Suleiman [en#5] gathering at the eastern edge of the Empire.

The Roman Church and the Protestors were told to present written position papers detailing their religious beliefs and practices. The chief protestor, Martin Luther, through his published writings, lectures, and sermons was the epicenter for the upsetting thought and practices occurring in churches during the reign of Charles V – the Church in which Charles and all the people in the Empire were members. As an outlaw under threat of arrest, Luther did not go out of Saxony to Augsburg. His position was filled by Philipp Melanchthon, who had worked closely with Luther during the previous years at Wittenberg University. Melanchthon's teaching skills and competence were essential for writing the explicit positions held by the Reformers.

The most noted document for the Augsburg assembly was penned by

Melanchthon during the five-month meeting. The document is called the “Augsburg Confession.” Out of the twenty-eight articles in the Confession only Article IV, on justification, is here examined for our study of the Law and Gospel reading of the Bible. Article IV reads:

“It is also taught among us that we cannot obtain forgiveness of sin and righteousness before God by our own merits, works, or satisfactions [Law], but that we receive forgiveness of sin and become righteous before God by grace, for Christ’s sake, through faith, when we believe that Christ suffered for us and that for his sake our sin is forgiven and righteousness and eternal life are given to us [Gospel]. For God will regard and reckon this faith as righteousness, as Paul says in Romans 3:21-26 and 4:5.” [bracketed terms added]

The Reformational understanding of justification in Article IV of the Augsburg Confession did not come from medieval theology. Medieval theology offered the sinner a “heaven-bound ladder” for salvation. It was a ladder with the rungs constructed of the sinner’s good works and God’s grace as a reward for those works. Reaching for higher and higher meritorious rungs, with the help of Christ and the Roman Church, the sinner would continue to climb and reach for the top rung of righteousness, God’s final “OK.” The reader can verify the accuracy of this simple metaphor by referring to the proceedings of the Council of Trent, Session Six, wherein the understanding in 1547 of the Roman Church’s position on justification is given. The Council of Trent was held in response to the teachings of the Reformers.

Article IV of the Augsburg Confession came from a clear Scriptural understanding of law, Gospel, and the wide separation between them. When sinners trust Christ’s offer of forgiveness – that’s what faith is – they are OK with God.

Charles V flatly rejected the entire Augsburg Confession. His hope for the Augsburg meeting was dashed – Germany was now in religious turmoil – the Reformation was firmly established – and the distinction between Law and Gospel was widely published. The Reformers had recovered the understanding that God’s law is one thing and the Gospel of Christ is something else for both understanding salvation and, right along with it, for a Gospel-grounded way to read the Bible.

Meanwhile, for reasons unknown, Suleiman and his armies withdrew without attacking the Empire.

LAW

The mention of Biblical “law” usually brings to mind the Ten Commandments and the story of Moses coming down from Mount Sinai. More infrequent is recalling Jesus’ interpretation of the law as written in Matthew beginning with Matthew 5:17.

In the Bible, “law” is much more than God’s commands and prohibitions. Although it is that, too – “thou shalt and thou shalt not.” Law constitutes a three-fold action of God that permeates all creation after the Fall. And that is the only creation we know, since we have no access to “what it was really like” before the first humans’ catastrophic attempt to “be like God.” In the now-fallen world, the world of our daily life, God’s law reveals three distinct “law-links” between God and humankind. These three enwrap our lives.

In the law’s first revelation God is CREATOR, giving us our existence, placing each of us in a specific context of space and time with manifold relationships – to people, places, and things. None of these did we choose; they are simply the “givens” of our personal existence. From that specific location where God has placed each one of us, our individual lives unfold as God “manages” our personal history within his governance of

world history. We are bound to God as our creator/manager whether we know it or not, whether we like it or not. We are entangled in this web by the mere fact that we exist at all somewhere in God's creation.

Secondly, God is LEGISLATOR, giving us orders, commandments, for how to live as his human being, as his "image" in this specific location amid all these relationships. The second disclosure reveals that God has expectations for how we are to "image" our Creator in the many relationships where he has placed us. What gets revealed about us is that we are under obligation to fulfill these expectations, to obey these commandments.

Luther's "Small Catechism" puts it this way at the end of his explanation of the creation article in the Apostles Creed: "For all of this – [these gifts from God my creator] – I am obligated to thank and to praise, to serve and obey him." Law as God's legislation reveals an imposing group of obligations, of tasks and assignments, within the first disclosure mentioned above, namely, that God has placed us in a complex network where we live our daily lives. This includes the "ought" with its drumbeat, thou shalt; thou shalt not.

The third disclosure is God the JUDGE, on the bench of world history (our personal history, too), evaluating us individually for how well we do as his "image." This third web puts us in the divine courtroom and we are on trial. God the law-giver now becomes God the evaluator – and finally God the judge. God passes sentence on us for how well we have done in this complex network of many webs that makes up our personal histories. The judgment reveals that we are overwhelmed by the web of obligations. This third disclosure goes beyond the first two. It entangles us in a web of evaluation that exposes the value, the worth, of our lives. Simply stated, it asks, Are we good or not good? Right or not right?

In the law's third disclosure those questions get answered. In God's action as our judge a verdict, a sentence, is passed on our entire lives – on everything we think or understand about ourselves. The verdict is not good news. Sinners always fail the exam.

The law uncovers not only individual sins, but the entire human self. We are exposed as a person living in hostility against God (Rom. 8:7). The Biblical concept of "sin" is not individual acts of breaking the commandments. Sin is a value word – yes, a negative value word – about our whole person. When the word "sinner" is the truth about me, then all of me, not just some part, is hostile to God. Sin is the "shape" of my person. That's the deep meaning of the word "sin" in the Bible. Sinful acts, breaking commandments, come as a consequence. The shape of the person determines the shape of that person's actions.

God's law does not leave any area of our life immune from its accusation – neither some segment of biography when we were supposedly "innocent," nor some segment of our self right now that is not hostile – the law pushes us to the conclusion that our sinfulness has been with us from the very beginning of our lives. That is what the term "original sin" means: humans "by nature" living in constant opposition to God right from the start.

Sin brings guilt. One way that humans are different from all of God's other creatures is that human creatures are accountable to God. They are personally evaluated. God checks on them, examines them, when he moves through his creation-garden (Gen. 3) with the penetrating exam question that he asked of Adam: "Where are you?" That is not a question about geography, but about obligations and responsibilities: Where are you on the list of obligations I gave you?

Begin with commandment #1: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind—all the time!" Who of us has ever "passed" the test of this first commandment? When we face that first commandment, we encounter guilt. The term guilt carries the negative verdict of failure to carry out obligations and responsibilities. Failure is a fact. The word "guilt" adds another quality to the fact. "Guilt" says: you are in trouble because of this failure. Your "person" now carries a negative value, negative worth, because of this failure. The guilt element in sin arises from God being the examiner. God is the one speaking the verdict about my negative value, the negative quality of my sinner-self. It's not just some human being whom I've failed, though it regularly is fellow humans functioning as God's agents who let me know where I've failed them, where I've broken God's own commandment.

Guilt is inescapable. That is revealed by the way the law makes no exceptions as it carries out its death threat – "the soul that sinneth, it shall die" – on every human being. But that then reveals God to be a god who kills his own creatures. That is a terrifying revelation – both about God and about us. No wonder Adam and Eve ran to hide from such a God. But where to go? There is no place where God's web doesn't entangle us. Everywhere sinners turn to escape they run into a sign: No Exit.

That raises God's self-revelation in law to fearful dimensions and prompts sinners, who have just been exposed by this revelation, to cry out: Is there any OTHER revelation of God, any other word from God, that might rescue us? The answer is yes. There is indeed another revelation from the same God. It is THE Good News, God's Gospel, centered in the words and work of Jesus. It is Christ's rescue operation to save us all from that dead end.

GOSPEL

The GOSPEL is the PROMISE of forgiveness of sins and justification because of Christ. Medieval theology had correctly taught that no one can stand before God (neither today nor on the Last Day) unless one has God's own righteousness. And the general conclusion was: Get busy! But God wants to give me that very necessary righteousness as a present, gratis, so that I can indeed stand before Him, not only on the Last Day but every day of my life from here to eternity. The name of that gratuitous present of God's own righteousness is Jesus Christ. So the "surprise" of Christianity, the unexpected Good News, is that although people do have to have God's righteousness, the righteousness is gratis – free.

The name of this surprise is Jesus Christ. Hence, Christ alone, no strings attached. The way that the free gift becomes my gift is "by faith." In Biblical language, faith means trust. Christ offers his promise of forgiveness as a gift. When we trust his promise, we become forgiven sinners. Faith alone does it. These three "alones" – grace alone, Christ alone, faith alone – became the motto of the Reformation.

Recorded in John 3:16, Jesus says, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." And again, based on Romans 3:21-26, Philipp Melanchthon wrote, "[W]e receive forgiveness of sin and become righteous before God by grace, for Christ's sake, through faith, when we believe that Christ suffered for us and that for his sake our sin is forgiven and righteousness and eternal life are given to us."

Melanchthon's confession and John's gospel differ only by the way they used the words. But what they say is the same thing. The terms "forgiveness of sin" and "righteous before God" are synonyms. The word "faith" means "believe that Christ suffered for us and that for his sake our sin is forgiven and

righteousness and eternal life are given us.” In Romans 3:22, Paul says, “Such faith equals righteousness.” Melancthon’s confession is found in Article IV of the Augsburg Confession presented to Charles V in 1530 at the Augsburg Diet, as previously mentioned.

The Gospel is the heart of the Bible. We have to know this heart ahead of time before we study the Scriptures, or we shall have to discover it during the very process of our Scriptural study.

[Final Part Three of the full text to be posted next Thursday. The author’s e-address is <HJDuffey at aol dot com>]

Law and Promise Reading of the Scriptures

Colleagues,

Today’s post and the ones coming in the next two weeks constitute the full text of a monograph by Dr. Harry J. Duffey, titled: “Introduction to Law & Promise Reading of the Scriptures.” Harry’s one sentence self-description goes like this: “Harry Duffey is a Crossings-junkie from its earliest days here in St. Louis and whose teaching interest has moved from engineering to theology.”

His description of the monograph goes like this:

“Ed Schroeder has posted many papers on Thursday Theology that apply Law/Promise hermeneutics to specific topics and happenings. This paper (Introduction to Law/Promise Reading of

the Scriptures) has taken parts of those postings which are generic to understanding Law/Promise hermeneutics and woven them with historical information taken from the time between the end of the Apostolic Age to the Protestant Reformation. The goal is to have a pamphlet that gives beginning Bible students the definitions and foundation for understanding the Law/Gospel interpretation of the New Testament."

Harry has parsed his paper into three segments for ThTh posting. Part one comes your way today. D.v., parts 2 and 3 will follow on June 16 and June 23. His e-address is <hjduffey at aol dot com>

Peace and joy!
Ed Schroeder

Introduction to Law & Promise Reading of the Scriptures

Part 1

- Introduction
- The Question
- Beginnings

Part 2

- Recovery of Law and Gospel
- Law
- Gospel

Part 3

- Biblicism
- Authority
- Conclusion
- Endnotes

“. . . handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you . . . so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.” Luke 1:1-4

Introduction

For decades, a common approach to introducing children to the Bible is through Bible stories taught in Sunday school. Both the Old and New Testaments are fragmented into stories for use in one-hour lessons that are intended to tell a complete story with a beginning and end. Hundreds of such lessons are available in printed format, with pictures and student activities, from various publishers. The Old Testament stories usually end with some type of moral or ethical conclusion. In some stories—for example, Noah’s Ark—the story images may become the lasting impression for the children. The Jesus lessons are from the New Testament stories, the most popular being those of the Christmas and Easter seasons.

If at the end of their Sunday school experience the children have in their core memories John 3:16, the melody of “Jesus Loves Me” with the first line memorized, and a memory of a friendly experience, then the Sunday school has done its job.

Near their age for completion of elementary school, in most denominations, the students enter the church’s confirmation class. The confirmands study the commandments, creeds, Lord’s Prayer, and sacraments from a New Testament perspective. Very little is mentioned about the Old Testament other than in reference to the Ten Commandments.

After confirmation, Bible studies become a hit-or-miss affair depending on the young person’s attendance in a Bible class.

People who come to faith or are attracted to church as an adult may read Bible text only during church services from the printed programs.

An obvious approach to increase Biblical knowledge, strengthen faith, and even introduce Christianity to young people and adults is to study the Bible. But how? The Bible is a thick book, not a quick read. Handing a Bible to a person, of any age, with the instruction, "you should read this," or "this has the answers to all your problems," or any other simple instruction, can, after a short endeavor, end their interest in Bible study. Why? If the reader begins at the beginning of Genesis, and stays with the text, the Bible can read as incomplete biology and geology (as is so often portrayed in the media). If the reader begins in the middle of the Bible, it may appear to be a book of proverbs. And if the reader starts at the end of the Bible with the intention of learning how the book ends, the imagery may cause him or her to think of the Bible as science fiction written for a movie with spectacular special effects. This example is perhaps extreme, but an in-depth study of the early Biblical scholars shows that incoherent approaches to the Bible are nothing new. For example, Origen (c.185-254) wrote multiple and layered interpretations of the Scriptures which can cause as much confusion as the above example.

This paper is an attempt to bring beginning Bible students "up to the speed" necessary to make a smooth transition from a Sunday school understanding (or less) of the Scriptures to a what-does-this-mean study of the various books of the New Testament by viewing the New Testament through the lens of God's Law and Promise/Gospel. Sufficient background information is given to enable the reader to understand the origin for this reading of the New Testament. This paper is not a defense for a Law/Promise reading of the Bible; it is a short description of the recovery of this reading of the Bible. The "restoration" of

Law and Gospel to its rightful position in understanding the Scriptures may be a better word choice than recovery. The theme of Law and Gospel had not gone unnoticed in the history of the medieval church. It simply was NOT the central theme and above all other themes. The medieval Roman Church controlled the message and would use interpretations that served a purpose at a given time, but the interpretation may be repudiated at a later date on the basis that it was just the writer's opinion and not the church's official position.

Three words that are often used in the history of this recovery require definition. The religious movement away from the Roman Church that occurred in Germany during the first half of the sixteenth century is historically referred to as the "Reformation," and the participants that led the movement as "Reformers." A third term emerged in 1529 when a large group of German rulers signed a petition to protest Emperor Charles V's decree for suppression of religious practices not in agreement with the Roman Church. The decree was not enforced and the protesters became known as "Protestants." Today, any adherent to a Christian church not affiliated with the Roman Church may be referred to as a Protestant.

The Reformers based their interpretation on one source, the Bible. Their written statements, which witness to their interpretation, are included in this text for study; the words "Law and Promise (Gospel)" are detailed as the reader moves through the paper. The availability of a study Bible will help the reader follow the Biblical texts as they are referred to in this work.

Many parts of the works of Prof. Edward Schroeder have been copied into this paper. Since there are so many of them, they are not shown in quotes. The reader can access at www.crossings.org his complete papers, which number in the

hundreds.

The Question

Luther's gift (1534) to Germany in that era we call the "Reformation" was translating the Bible—the whole thing, all 66 books—into normal, everyday speech.[endnote #1] Hence, every one of his fellow Germans, if they had learned to read, could read the Bible. Even while working on that task—he worked on it for almost 20 years—there was conflict in the church in his day about HOW to read (interpret) the Bible. That was true even about HOW to read the Latin translations of the Scriptures that were standard texts for 1,000 years in the church before Luther's time.

People took sides about what were the right way and wrong way to read the Bible. Isn't there only one "right" way to read the Bible? Isn't it to read it just as it is and take the words for what they simply say? "The Bible says it. Doesn't that settle it?" No, it doesn't. People read the Bible with different glasses—even if they have perfect eyesight. Without the right glasses, you can miss the main message, the Good News that came with Jesus. The differences between the Christian denominations of our time are rooted in different ways of reading the Bible. And nowadays the same disagreement about what the Bible really says exists inside almost every denomination.

It was exactly the same in Jesus' day. Most of his debates, yes, his conflicts with the religious leaders of his time, were about how to read the Bible. In those days the Bible consisted only of what we nowadays call the Old Testament, the Hebrew Scriptures.

Over and over again Jesus and his critics are arguing about the Bible, what it "really" says. On one of the occasions, described in Matt 9:13, Jesus simply tells them "go and learn what this means" and quotes Hosea 6:6. Again, in Matt 12:7, Jesus says,

“If you had known what these words mean,” and again quotes Hosea 6:6. His critics did indeed know this Bible text—could doubtless recite it by heart. But, Jesus says, “You don’t know what it means.” In other words, “You’re reading it wrong. You’re using the wrong glasses. So when you quote it to support your critique of me, that does not settle it. ”

Luther’s greater gift to the Reformation was Biblical interpretation. Indeed, interpretation became a focal issue in the Protestant Reformation. The use of the word “interpretation” is used in its common understanding; it does not mean that the interpreter has identified a code that unravels hidden secrets in the text. The reader must be aware that Biblical theology is embodied in literary forms that vary among the more than thirty manuscript authors. The text is presented in the literary forms of parables, poetry, psalms, chronicles, proverbs, narratives, epistles, allegories, metaphors, images, and more.

Robert W. Bertram [en#2] focused our attention on the Law/Promise reading of the Scriptures when he wrote, “[I]t is impossible to ask how Scripture is to be interpreted without constantly asking how people are to be saved. Biblical hermeneutics is at no point separable from Biblical soteriology.” These are two big words, hermeneutics and soteriology. In simple words, how you read the Bible (hermeneutics) is always linked to how you think people get saved (soteriology).

Bertram’s statement presupposes that the Bible reader believes (or has a “feeling”) that there is meaning to the idea that there is a God and that humankind has (or can have) a relationship with that God. Additionally, Bertram assumes this relationship is accurately presented in the Old and New Testaments. If a person believes that a God-humankind relationship is just foolishness, then any Biblical

interpretation describing that relationship is obviously foolishness. There are secular readings of the Bible for studies in various areas such as Hebrew poetry, ancient Semitic languages, Greek language usage, epic literature, legal and moral codes, and the like. Secular readings, though valuable, are not the topic of this study.

So taking Bertram's statement as your own idea, and with the certainty of the things you have been taught and your self-certainty of reason, what would you think if someone said, "I believe in the Bible, that it is the 100% inspired, inerrant word of God. I accept every word in it and live according to it." What is that person suggesting as the way people get saved?

You should ponder your answer and return to it after reading the complete paper.

Beginnings

Pages numbering in the tens of thousands have been written on Biblical interpretations. This short brochure is simply giving the reader a quick entry into a specific Biblical interpretation, namely, Law and Promise. A continuous, though narrow, path is laid from the first century to the fifteenth century, allowing you to follow a marked trail directly to the Law/Promise interpretation. After a fast journey along this path, you are encouraged to make excursions, at leisure, into some of those thousands of pages to widen the trail and add depth to your Biblical knowledge and background to the interpretations.

Approximately three-fourths of the Bible's pages consists of the Old Testament; the remaining one-fourth is the New Testament. The New Testament, the Jesus story, is a collection of 27 different writings that include the life and teachings of Jesus, the activities of the apostles, and letters to various

groups. The original manuscripts were all written as separate documents and in Greek. Although all the Mediterranean world was ruled by Rome, the language of the Empire was for the most part Greek.

By the end of the Apostolic age (c. 100 AD), the authors and eyewitnesses to the events of these manuscripts had died; there were Christian churches in over 40 places along the edge of the Mediterranean Sea, all in countries under the rule of the Roman Empire. These churches formed a 2,500-mile arc from Italy through Turkey to Libya, Rome through Antioch to Cyrene. By 100 AD the word "Christian" was a familiar word.

The language of Rome, Latin, spread eastward among the churches of those areas. During the second and third centuries, the Greek New Testament was translated into Latin. These translations, called the Old Latin Bible, were used until Jerome's [en#3] Latin translation, called the Vulgate, became the standard of the medieval church. Latin had replaced Greek and became the official language of the church by the fourth century.

Until Gutenberg's invention of the movable-type printing press in 1454, all Bibles were hand copied. The required ability to read Latin and the cost of a Bible made personal ownership a rarity. Most people would see a Bible only on Sunday and only if the congregation was rich enough to own one. The medieval church held that the Scriptures were under ecclesiastical control and only the clergy had the authority to interpret them.

Christ had founded the Church in the first century. During the next fourteen centuries of church activities, the clear understanding of Biblical Law and Gospel was diminished as other priorities grew. The theology taught in universities and monasteries was a mixture of veiled, mystic theology and church tradition. The reader needs only to study a small portion of the

major theological text used in the medieval universities, "Sentences" by Peter Lombard (which was in use at the time of the Reformation), to understand why Biblical Law and Gospel played a very small part in medieval church teachings.

"The law says, Do this! And it is never done, whereas the Gospel says, Believe in this one, and everything is already done."
Martin Luther, 1518

[Parts 2 and 3 to follow in the postings for the next two weeks.]