

Christianity. The First Three Thousand Years.

Colleagues,

This week's post is a book review by Dean Lueking, who (surprise! surprise!) is also pictured on the graduating class photo of Concordia Seminary 1954 where I show up too. He's now retired after a long term of service as pastor at Grace Lutheran Church, River Forest, Illinois. Dean has been involved in "world" Lutheranism for most of his life, beginning with his two-year seminary internship in Japan during our student days [he can still manage a homily in Japanese when he's back visiting there], continuing throughout his years at Grace, River Forest, and now going full-tilt during his alleged retirement. Most recent item that I know of was a gig in Mexico earlier this year.

Before not too many more ThTh postings appear, we hope to bring you a review of Dean's own recent book, a report of the faith and life of Lutherans around the world presented in their own words and viewed through their own eyes. Stay tuned.

Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder

**Diarmaid MacCulloch: CHRISTIANITY.
The First Three Thousand Years.
New York: Viking Press, 2009.1161 pp.**

The price of this book is \$45 (\$25 paperback). Its 1161 pages make it for sure a lengthy read. It is authored by a historian

not (yet) widely known on this side of the Atlantic. All that notwithstanding, I took the plunge anyway, ordered it, read it through at a leisurely pace, and recommend it wholeheartedly to any and all interested in an innovative telling of the story of the Christian church.

Let me cite an example of what caught my eye when initially picking up the book and randomly opening it to p. 948. Tucked away in a paragraph summarizing the significance of Dietrich Bonhoeffer is a ten line tribute to a church sexton in an Austrian village, Franz Jaegerstaetter, who refused to support his country's absorption into Hitler's cause and paid for it with his life. "He was beheaded in Berlin in 1943 and the inclusion of his name on his village's war memorial after the Second World War was the subject of heated local argument" is a seemingly dismissable detail. But it impressed me that MacCulloch could dig that minor event out of some remote historical dust bin and turn it into a telling hint about the continuing ambivalence with which Austrian villagers deal with their years under Hitler.

If a detail of that order could be vacuumed up to add value to a massively inclusive narrative of three millennia of church history, I grew curious about what else this British historian can teach us through his frequent, illustrative references to people, well known and little known, who personalize a church history that can too easily remain impersonal. My curiosity was well rewarded. MacCulloch's *CHRISTENDOM* is amazing in its scope and method, moreso than any other church history I can recall reading.

First, the title. Christendom's first THREE millennia is the author's way of calling attention to the preceding thousand years of history in Israel, Greece, and Rome that he sees as foundational for understanding the two millennia of Christianity

in the world. I don't know of a church historian who devotes his opening section to such a subject with more skill and clarity. It is his way of helping the reader to "stand back from Christianity, whether they love it or hate it, or are simply curious about it, and see it in the round" (p. 12). Throughout his book he avoids the clutter of over-quoting primary sources (though the final 112 pages of bibliography testify to his knowledge of them). What MacCulloch gives us in seven major sections is an admirably condensed synthesis of the current state of historical scholarship on the persons, movements, and eras he treats, gracefully told in such a way that attracts and holds the attention of a larger audience too often bewildered by if not dismissive of church history altogether.

Diarmaid MacCulloch describes himself as "a candid friend of Christianity." This personal statement is more than anecdotal. It defines his stance as a historian who purposely writes not from within but from outside the church whose story he tells. This strengthens his credibility as a scholar who sees his task not as pronouncing on God's existence and ways of working in history. Rather it is to approach the story of Christianity as a meticulous researcher (and faculty member at Cambridge and Oxford universities) and teller of a complicated and varied history who strives to avoid the extremes of triumphalism on the one hand and oversimplified debunking on the other. Thus he can be unsparing in exposing the criminal follies that darken the church's history as well as genuine in citing the highest achievements of goodness, creativity and generosity of those who have borne Christ's name through the centuries.

McCulloch offers a unique framework in his overall structure of Christian history. After beginning with the millennium of Greece, Israel, and Rome from 1000 BCE – 100 CE, he devotes Part II to the coming of Jesus, Paul, and the shaping of the early church and key personages and movements up to 451. The Council

of Chalcedon remains his point of departure for his next three major divisions of the book because he chooses that decisive, problematic Council as a measure for how the eastern and western church thought and expressed itself on the divine and the human nature of Jesus Christ. Thus Part III spans a thousand-year arc from Chalcedon to 1500 A.D., with particular attention to the eastern church, the impact of Islam, and the church in Africa (that millennium that Philip Jenkins aptly describes as *The Lost History of Christianity* (2008, Harper). Part IV covers the same millennium in the western church. Part V again begins with Chalcedon in 451 and tracks among a host of other things the importance of the development of Orthodoxy and the emergence of Russia as the Third Rome. Part VI incorporates the various reformations from 1300-1800 (his treatment of Luther and what began at Wittenberg seems disappointingly thin; of greater value is his attention to Christianity becoming a worldwide faith in Africa, Asia, and America during these three centuries). Part VII is another giant leap from 1492 till the present, with detailed sections devoted to the Enlightenment in its varied forms, the Protestant world mission, the church's fortunes under colonialism in Asia and Africa, the Catholic renaissance of mission, "A War That Killed Christendom" (1914-1918, MacCulloch's striking depiction of the impact of World War I), followed by further World War II testing under Nazism and Communism, leading to the ecumenical realignment of world Christianity and the dramatic shift of Christian growth to the global South.

This bare outline of MacCulloch's unique periodization of church history hardly does justice to the richness of the content he weaves into these sections. Nonetheless, let it serve as a commentary on a main strength of his book: keeping his historical scope worldwide at every stage. This is especially important for readers like me and my woefully inadequate

knowledge of the course of eastern Christianity in the first millennium of church history. Example: if one were to speculate on where the most important center of Christendom would be as the 8th century began it would be Baghdad, not Rome. Example: the early expansion of Christianity after the Book of Acts was more successful in Asia than in the west. Example: the dire effect of the Crusades hurt the eastern church more than the west. Example: the modern globalization of Christianity is not a new phenomenon in Asia and Africa as much as it is a returning home to those regions where the faith was born and grew in its earliest years.

Here are other insights not found in the church histories with which I am familiar.

Colder climatic change and thus worsening living conditions in northern Europe from 1200-1400 contributed to the flowering of distinctive Western devotional life that stressed God as actively intervening in his creation and a more personal exposition of the human reality of Christ and his Mother. . . . When the worried townspeople of Oslo, Norway, endowed an altar in their cathedral for St. Sebastian as a protector against the Black Death it didn't put up an impressive performance; in the next five years between one third and two thirds of the population of Europe died of the bubonic plague. . . . Biblical genealogies which bored or baffled pious Europeans were the delight of Africans whose societies relished such repetitions and who often took the Bible more seriously than the missionaries in the sense that they confidently expected concrete results from the power of God. . . . The sufferings of the Russian Orthodox Church during the seventy years from 1922 – 1992 represent one of the worst betrayals of hope in the history of Christianity, stoked by a Bolshevik leader/thug who was possibly the bastard son of a priest, who never fulfilled his mother's hopes that he would become a bishop, who, as an

expelled seminarian, adopted the pseudonym Josef Stalin. . . In the fifth century Syrian Orthodox Church there evolved a particular form of sacred self-ridicule or critique of society's conventions: the tradition of the Holy Fool – exemplified by Simeon who dragged a dead dog around, threw nuts at women during church services and gleefully rushed naked into the women's section of the bathhouse of the city of Emesa. Such extrovert craziness is an interesting counterpart or safety valve to the ethos of prayerful silence and traditional solemnity which is so much a part of the Orthodox identity. . .

These samplings are cited not to suggest that the book dotes on historical oddities or undue emphasis on bizarre practices in remote places. They are matters of interest for the sake of the larger meaning MacCulloch is after, as well as being tributes to the author's art of bringing broad swaths of historical movements into focus through real people living in real time. He does that again and again, often with a well-chosen adjective or a sly jab of humor. Another benefit of his focus on the meaningful individual is the manner in which he will return to that person's ongoing significance much later in the Christian story. By this method he keeps teaching us how inter-related people and events are in the long march of the church's centuries.

MacCulloch's personal agenda sometimes shows through. As a faithful gay Christian, one raised in an Anglican manse and headed for ordination but derailed by his church's position on homosexuality in the 1980's, he can allude to the mostly negative attitudes and actions of the church toward gay persons in a tone that carries only the slightest hint of a barely discernable acerbic cast to what is said. Given the circumstances of his earlier aspirations for a calling in the Church of England, his reserve is as noteworthy as his candor in naming matters that continue to be painfully unsettled.

I've made the point that the book is indeed immense in its scope. I add that it is exhaustively documented for pinpoint accuracy in the most minute detail (including the weird spelling of early Syrian dynastic regimes). To underscore his meticulous care in documentation, I must mention the only inaccuracy I came across in over a thousand pages of text. He states that the 1980 assassination of the Salvadoran Archbishop Oscar Romero took place "in his own cathedral" (p. 996). Actually, it occurred in a small Catholic hospital chapel in San Salvador.

Let my smugness in even mentioning such a minuscule matter serve only to underscore the overwhelming excellence of Diarmaid MacCulloch's CHRISTIANITY. THE FIRST THREE THOUSAND YEARS.

Dean Lueking

Confessing the Faith on Confirmation Day

Colleagues,

A few weeks ago we were out of town for the confirmation ceremony of 24 eighth-graders, one of them from the Schroeder clan. The congregation's practice is to ask each confirmand to offer a personal confession of faith to the assembly in a Friday evening service before Confirmation Sunday. Each confirmand has an adult congregation member as personal mentor. The personal confessions had been prepared in advance, were then printed in the Friday service folder (2 pages each) and then publicly confessed one by one from the lectern. All of it enwrapped in a liturgy of Evening Prayer.

Curmudgeonly old prof of the Lutheran Confessions that I am, I was listening for the Christ-component, the "Christ-is-necessary," in the faith statements of these young Christians. When the service concluded I was not rejoicing. Now back home I've read the printed texts of what I heard as oral witness. I report them here in three categories

- In nine of the 24 confessions the word Jesus or Christ does not appear at all. God is confessed, but there is no Christ. "God is there with me," "God is staying with us," "I see God in many places." "God plays a part in my life because he gives me the power to be an individual." "God will help you face the hard times in your life no matter who you are if you hope and believe in Him." "Although bad things happen, God helps us get through them." "I know that with the things I have been taught and with God as my co-pilot I can begin to trust myself to choose the paths and make the decisions that are right for me." "Through everything, every evil or misfortune, God will still be there, on our side, loving us." "God is there to watch over us, but not to interfere with everything in our lives." "With God leading the way, I can be strong and courageous to do the right thing and I do not need to be frightened or dismayed that what I am doing is not enough." The faith being confessed here is faith in a hidden god who is always "there," always helpful, never critical. With "do the right thing" added, we have theistic moralism, but not the Christian faith.
- In seven of them the word Jesus or Christ (or both) occur, but with no reference to his work of salvation. In some the terms Jesus or Christ are used as interchangeable synonyms for the word God and the core-confession is like the one above, "generic" God-talk. with no necessity to link the Jesus/Christ nouns to what's being confessed.

“Our Holy Father and Jesus Christ give us the strength to get through bad times.” “God is present and guides us throughout our lives.” “God’s going to be there for us no matter what situation you are in....I feel Jesus is there to help me make good decisions. I believe that Jesus is the voice in my head that tells me to do the right thing.” “[God] calls us . . . to work heartily, as if serving the Lord, and look forward to receiving the inheritance as my reward through Jesus Christ.” With no salvation-reference when naming Jesus, these confessions are in the same ballpark as those above, with the name of Jesus as an addendum, but not a needed one.

- In eight of them the name of Jesus occurs with explicit reference to his saving work. Frequently with “Jesus died for my sins” or “sacrificed his life for me.” Yet here too moralism surfaces, and “sacrificed his life for me” leads to the conclusion: “I can hear Jesus saying ‘You can do it, Sandra [not her real name]. Just try your best and believe in me.’” “God sent his Son Jesus down to earth, who died for our sins. [conclusion] God has a plan for me and in order to achieve his plan I must work hard at all things that are put in front of me. As I head on to High School, no matter which path I take, I know that God will be there for me.” Even in these confessions the theology of the cross gets entangled with theology of glory. But Jesus-as-savior is there, sometimes central. One of these eight confessors did so with reference to God’s Promise! “God does not fulfill his promise when Judah is conquered But he does, through the new covenant in Jesus Christ. Not just to Israel, but to the whole world, God heals and restores us to life by sending his son to die for our sins. In the new covenant, he fulfills his promise of old.” Where did he get that?!

These 24 confessions articulate explicitly personal-life-linked

faith-statements, eminently publishable prose, often telling of personal struggles and linking the confessor's faith to those life situations. Super! But what was the faith confessed? By my curmudgeonly calculation one-third of the confessors confessed Jesus as Savior (mostly); two-thirds confessed faith in a generic God—yes, a hidden God—along with a commitment to live a moral life under that God's guidance. Question: Isn't that the folk religion of America? Generic world-religion? Islam without the Quran? On Sunday all were confirmed.

All of which left me wondering—after almost weeping. What was the guidance these confirmands had in the run-up to this Friday evening? What were they told about what they were doing? What role did the pastor, the mentor, the parents play? What was the catechesis that preceded these confessions? The opening sentences in Jochen Teuffel's article (last week's ThTh post on Islamization) are haunting: "What threatens Christianity's existence among us is [not Islam, but] the fact that people do not really believe in the One who gave Christianity its name, nor trust his message or his work. Unlike unbelieving Thomas, people are unwilling to put their finger to Jesus' wounds and thereby come to trust the crucified and risen Christ."

One of the 24 confessors set my mind to wandering—and wondering. He was the only one to cite Luther's catechism in his faith statement. It was a sentence from Luther's explanation of the third article of the Apostles Creed. "The Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith." That led this confessor to "work for the Lord by participating in the church whatever our task. I have studied violin for several years . . . I think this is a gift God has given me, that I enjoy spreading the Word of God through music." Good enough.

Yet he didn't get to Luther's main point (and very first words)

in this third article explanation: "I believe that I cannot, by my own reason or resources, believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him. BUT the Holy Ghost calls me by the Gospel . . ." for that explicit purpose: that I DO believe in Jesus Christ as my Lord, DO come to him.

Luther's point is that the SECOND article of the creed is what makes this creed, any creed, Christian. That's really a no-brainer. Christian = Christ confessing. Christ is the Greek word for Messiah. Christian faith is a Messiah-faith. A messiah is a rescuer, aka redeemer, savior.

Apart from the work of the Holy Spirit, no one ever "comes to him." There is so self-salvation in the Christian story, nor any self-connection to the one who brings salvation. But since Christ's Easter-cum-Pentecost the Holy Sprit is now loose in the world. Doing what? "Calling, gathering, enlightening" disconnected sinners "to come to Jesus Christ as their Lord and believe in him." The Holy Spiirit is the Christ-connector, doing so via "the whole Christian church on earth." One vehicle of which is churchly catechesis, aka confirmation instruction.

The Apostles Creed was printed at the center of the booklet of these 24 confessions. Except for page-proximity most of the 24 were not close.

So how about this? For these 24 dear confessors, patently serious in expressing their faith, would this have helped them make clear, Christ-clear, confessions as they went to the lectern that Friday evening? Give them all a Christian "classic" confession—say, this one below straight from Luther's catechism—and ask them to "make it your own" by putting something from your own life, your own heart and mind, your own struggles, at every place where Luther has "I, me, my, mine" in his confession. And then tell us. Remember we're talking about

the Christian faith. The crucified and risen Messiah is the hub at the center of the wheel.

“I believe that Jesus Christ, true God begotten of the Father from eternity, and also true man, born of the virgin Mary, is my Lord, who has redeemed me a lost and condemned creature, purchased and won me from death and the power of the devil, not with gold or silver, but with his holy, precious blood and with his innocent suffering and death, that I may be his own, live under him in his kingdom, and serve him in everlasting righteousness, innocence and blessedness, even as he is risen from the dead, lives and reigns to all eternity. This is most certainly true.”

If they had started with that classic confession, a “standard” confession of the Christian faith, what might they have come up with for this Friday service? How might they have then possibly “needed” in their thinking to get to the third article confession, so that they might see how they came to the Christ-is-my-Lord confession in the first place? And then from that center get back to the first article on creation, even to Luther’s own proposal for What does this mean? Which says nothing at all about Genesis 1—nor the big bang, of course—but rings the changes on these opening words: “I believe that God created me.”

I have no knowledge of the catechesis curriculum that these young confessors traversed.

My own thoughts about such matters, especially after this event, go in this direction:

1. DO NOT start with the Bible. Do NOT start with Adam and Eve. The Christian faith is NOT a “religion of the book.” Islam definitely is, and Judaism may well be, but Christian faith is the “religion” confessed by the one-

time unbelieving disciple Thomas: "You, Jesus, are my Lord and my God." Its center is a God-person, not a God-book.

2. Biblical illiteracy may be a fact of life in American society today—and among many (most?) church-goers too. But knowing what's in the Bible is not identical with Christian faith, nor any guarantee to get you there. Jesus' on-going debate with his critics, who were super-literate about the Bible but missed the Gospel IN the Bible, makes this point "perfectly clear." There is absolutely no correlation between a Bible-quiz whiz and a Christ-confessor. Even granting Bible-illiteracy as true within the churches as well, it is Christ-illiteracy that is the Trojan horse.
3. So start with the Christ-confession at the center of the Christian creed. If you can't find a better text for this, use Luther's own single paragraph in the Small Catechism.
4. From there go to article three and then to article one. Luther's paragraphs for these are not bad.
5. Before you go to the Bible, shake out of the catechumens the alternative "lords and gods" their hearts are hanging onto. Canvass the "lord and god" proposals they confront in just one day in their lives at school or after school.
6. Then first go to the Bible, beginning with the N.T. Maybe one of the Gospels, maybe one of the "easier"(?) epistles. Always keep the focus on the core and alongside that, the alternatives to the core that show up in the Biblical text(s) as teasing proposals to trust instead of Christ.
7. When the time is right, move on to the spokes that radiate from that Christ-hub at the center. You could begin with other parts from the catechism.
 - The decalog as God's X-ray of the de facto realities tugging at our hearts to not "fear, love and trust him."
 - The Lord's Prayer presented (as Luther proposes,

explicitly in his Large Catechism) for daily-life coping to “keep the faith” in daily life with the “devil, the world, and our own egos” pulling our hearts to hang onto other lords and gods.

- The three sacraments—in their respective distinct paradigms—as resources for doing just that.

8. THEN go to the Bible. Reading the N.T. for illuminating, deepening, connecting data about the Christ-hub and the spokes.
9. When going to the OT, go “carefully,” keeping in mind that the O.T. scriptures are a running report of the faith and unfaith of God’s ancient people, their personal hospital chart, and not God’s diagnosis nor prescription for all people of all times. Rather, as the NT apostles and evangelists keep insisting, they were written “to instruct you for salvation through faith in Jesus Christ.” To “use” the OT for that end will entail some reconnoitering, some ingenuity, some selection (and some rejection?), some practice, and, quite likely, some mistakes.
10. When it comes to confirmation time, asking the candidates to write their own confession is a good idea. Don’t let these confessions be “saved” until confirmation day, but use them in the final catechesis sessions for “mutual edification,” and, of course, for helping each confirmand make a clearer, crisper, confession of the hub of the wheel—and of as many spokes of that wheel as she/he wishes to address. Or catechesis might simply begin with the Easter shout: “Christ is Risen!” and then ask: what’s that all about? Why would anyone respond “Risen indeed!”? Why “Hallelujah!”?

Start at the center. So that on Confirmation Day the new confessors do too.

Peace and Joy!

Islamization and the Christian Gospel.

Colleagues,

Jochen Teuffel, Lutheran pastor in Bavaria, Germany, has appeared before in ThTh postings. Most recent was earlier this year in ThTh 658 <https://crossings.org/thursday/2011/thur012011.shtml>

Today's ThTh post picks up a sticky wicket in German church life today. But also elsewhere in the "Christian" world. It appeared April 18 in the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung. [FAZ is the NYT of Germany.] Here he addresses the Angst in his homeland (ours too?) about the relentless growth of Muslim populations in European societies. Such growth is all the more "disturbing," even to European secularists, because Europe still lives on ostensibly "Christian" values and "Christian" traditions that are not at home in the social fabric of Islam. But the Christian Gospel, says Teuffel, is not threatened by such increasing "islamization." Nor are those who trust that Gospel. And to make his point Teuffel proclaims the Gospel to his readers—also those un-churchy readers of FAZ—to allay that Angst and to "listen once more to the Savior" and his "Fear not, only believe." I.e., "just trust my Gospel."

[Besides sending me his German text as it appeared in FAZ, Jochen alerted me to an English translation already online at a website for dialogue with the Islamic world sponsored by the

German federal government. Marie and I have taken this translation and reworked it into American English. Or so we think.]

Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder

“Listen Once More to the Savior”

- Christian churches in Germany would discredit themselves by forming any alliance with today’s critics of Islam in our society.
- Christians must face up to the fact that they are a minority.
- Christian tolerance of others is cruciform, shaped by the cross.

A commentary from Lutheran Pastor Jochen Teuffel.

Christianity in Europe is facing an existential problem. It is not the increasing secularization of society, nor its alleged Islamification. What threatens Christianity’s existence among us lies instead in the fact that people do not really believe in the One who gave Christianity its name, nor trust his message or his work. Unlike unbelieving Thomas, people are unwilling to put their finger to Jesus’ wounds and thereby come to trust the crucified and risen Christ.

The scandal of the Christian faith lies in Jesus’ last word on the cross: “Tetelestai!” – it is finished. There is nothing we mortals can add to Christ’s offering his life for our sake. What is left for Christians to do is celebrate Jesus’ pascal mystery in worship, give witness to his name in mission, and serve the neighbor, no matter how “strange” he or she may be.

Overarching everything is tolerance, which means nothing else than simply bearing the burden of what opposes and offends us, because we can neither avert nor ignore it, nor, least of all, find it acceptable.

THE CHRISTIAN PATH, A MINORITY'S PATH

Christ's crucifixion is a palpable manifestation of this commitment to tolerance – quite literally. Jesus impressed upon his disciples their calling to follow him to martyrdom with the words: "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it." (Mark 8:34f).

The Bible envisions that Christians will be traveling a minority pathway on which they will have to endure slander, persecution, and even violence to their persons because of their linkage to Christ: "Indeed, all who want to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted." (2 Timothy 3:12).

With good reason, Martin Luther in his treatise *On Councils and the Church* (1539) refers to persecution as one of the seven marks of Christianity: "The seventh external mark for recognizing God's holy Christian people is the sanctifying work of the holy cross. They must suffer every misfortune and persecution, all kinds of trials and evil from the devil, the world, and the flesh, in order to become like their head, Christ."

Even in their own society, according to Luther, Christians must suffer a hatred more bitter than that which afflicts the Jews, heathens and Turks. They must "be called the worst people in the world, to the point where they are 'doing God service' who hang them, drown them, slay them, torture them, hunt them down,

plague them to death; not because they are adulterers, murders, thieves or scoundrels, but because they will to have Christ alone and no other God.”

GOD RULES IN WORLDLY WEAKNESS

Indeed, the “Word of the cross” (1 Corinthians 1:18) projects unreasonable expectations on Christians. It gives them no special status in their own society. Such status is precisely what Jesus rejected for himself and his disciples when interrogated by Pontius Pilate: “My kingdom is not of this world: if my kingdom were of this world, then would my servants fight” (John 18:36). The symbol of Emmanuel – “God with us” (see Matthew 1:22f) – has no place on military belt buckles. From the cruciform dialectic of God ruling in worldly weakness no policies of state can be deduced. Absolutely none. It is precisely because this is true that Christians see secularized state as legitimate..

Participants in the debate about German society’s recognition of Islam frequently make reference to an “over-arching Christian culture” in European history. In cases where this is intended to bring into play a Western, Christian requirement for Muslims, this is the surest way to discredit the Gospel and the cross of Christ in society. In such instances cruciform tolerance is replaced by a human claim to religious power over people, applied with political pressure, far removed from personal faith.

Socially conservative Christians attracted to such an option may achieve a short-term alliance with church-disinterested—or even atheist—critics of Islam. In the long term, however, promoting such a “Christian” heritage supposedly still alive in the West, is nothing more than a “post-secular” attempt to re-establish a particular bond with church traditions by means of social-

political policy.

When “Christian values” are again made the basis for inclusion or exclusion in society, it inevitably awakens the collective memory of Europe’s overarching “Christian society, Christian culture” preceding the Enlightenment . The pathos of bourgeois freedom and self-determination is summoned up as a *cri de guerre* against the imagined restoration of religiously motivated social discipline. In the long run, the critique of religion now applied to Islam in Germany will eventually affect the Churches too. Thus, the current debate on Islam can only encourage a development towards a “religion-less” state, which would be tantamount to edging the churches completely out of the public sphere.

CONTRA CULTURAL AND RELIGIOUS CONSERVATISM

Furthermore, a Western “Christian” cultural prerequisite for people to live in our society makes Christian missionary work among Muslims in Europe practically impossible. Those who demand some basic religious convictions – and not loyalty to the law, for instance – as a prerequisite for inclusion in society, cannot simultaneously proclaim Christ’s surrender of his life on the cross as an act of redemption. Coming from the minority position we Christians have in society our Christian witness remains credible only then, when nothing more than personal faith, personal commitment, gives it validity apart from any societal pressures for anyone to accept it. Thus, the state’s religious neutrality and freedom of religion in fact guarantee that we can bring Christ’s message into play as relevant for life in our society, and do so without coercion.

Institutional Christianity still has difficulties coming to terms with its minority position in society. Religious pluralization and increasing numbers of people leaving the

Church do, after all, cause a lot of trouble for its own allegedly hereditary status in society. It would seem logical in this situation to defend claims about the importance of religion on cultural grounds. Nevertheless a religious conservatism that relies on maintaining some sort of “Christian” culture is a lost cause. The only thing that gives hope and confidence for the future is for Christians to look once more to the cross. Jesus’ message from the cross, “It is finished!” places our current society under an eschatological qualifier (modifier?). There may be increasing religious pluralization, the churchly milieu of society may further dissolve, fewer and fewer people believe in God; and yet all this does not affect in the slightest the incarnate act of redemption on the cross.

Christians have nothing to lose that we have not long since won in Christ. According to biblical testimony, what was finished on the cross – the victory over sin and death – will be validated throughout the cosmos at the end of world history in Christ’s second coming. For those who trust this promise, their own tolerance of opposition is not dejected acceptance of a pluralist society, dealt them by fate. Through their faith in Christ’s “It is finished!”, Christians in fact escape the bourgeois identity trap in which fear of life or of death comes in prophecies of society’s collapse. Instead, Saint Paul’s testimony has the last word: “For I am persuaded that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:38f).

“All Done.” The Homily on the Occasion of George Hoyer’s Funeral

Colleagues,

Last week Thursday (May 5) Marie and I were in Worcester, Massachusetts for the funeral liturgy of her brother George Hoyer. His two sons, pastors Peter and Christopher, conducted the liturgy as celebrant and homilist, respectively. For a number of you on this listserv George was teacher and/or colleague. I have Chris’s permission to pass his proclamation on to you.

Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder

“All Done.”

The Homily on the Occasion of George Hoyer’s Funeral

5. May 2011 + Trinity Lutheran Church, Worcester

The Lord is Risen! He is Risen, Indeed! Alleluia!

George William, baptized child of God,
walked the last leg of the journey to unbounded joy
gamely, confidently, faith-fully . . .
yet, by his reckoning in any event,
entirely too slowly.

Now that walk is ended

and for this gift, with him, we give God heart-felt thanks

today.

Isaiah [46:4, the first reading in the liturgy] has it right:
God made him.

God carried him. (Even to his old age.)

God saved him.

You, too, have carried him, lo these many years.

This gracious pastor [Susan Nachtigal] and her gentle spouse.

And you – this loving assembly called Trinity –

this confederation of clergy-types of Central Massachusetts –
by your caring, your hospitality, your good company.

You, too, have carried him,

and for this, our family, gives God heart-felt thanks today.

Yet this day felt like a long time coming.

Some Tuesday noon – last week? – the week before that? –

George whispered to me,

“I guess I just want it to be done now.”

That, surely, was part of the mind of Christ,

in those late, agonizing hours of Good Friday.

“How long, O Lord, how long?” “My God, my God.” “I guess I just
want it to

be done now.”

But now the One who called George to this life

has allowed him, with his Lord, to whisper at last, “it is
finished.”

Which is more than a metaphor . . .

Which is the holy truth of the catholic faith . . .

The hope of those who live . . .

The joy of those who die in the Lord . . .

since our Lord Christ’s assumption of the punishment

for the failings of our fathers and the sins of the sons –

His willing embrace of the death that was rightfully our own.

Our Lord Jesus' words, "It is finished,"
announces, with a loud voice, the beginning of life beyond our
imagining
(let alone our deserving)
into which George entered in his baptism
and has now entered more completely still
and which beckons humankind, every day and everywhere and
always.

Years ago, in a barn-like parsonage in Nowhere, New Jersey,
Peter's first child, George's first granddaughter,
a toddler still,
cried uncontrollably for no apparent reason,
until, as I recall, (or at least as I long to remember it)
her grand-père took her into his arms . . .
at which point she sighed deeply,
and ended that crying jag with a whispered, "All done."

This is the holy truth of the crucifixion restated.
What needed doing for God's servant George . . .
What needed doing for us all . . .
was completed in the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus
Christ.
When he uttered those sacred words, "It is finished,"
He meant: "All done."

Simeon saw it. "Lord, now you let your servant go in peace."
Thomas touched it. "My Lord and my God!"
George was blessed to proclaim it: point, problem, power.
"How beautiful are the feet of those who bring the good news."

These last months have been filled with hours and hours of
sleep.
An active person in every respect (pastor, professor, author,
father, avid

read of detective fiction)

George began to find all that sleeping somewhat troublesome.

At one point, Susan reported, George furrowed his brow and inquired,

“Do I have a right to sleep this long?”

I should say . . . I should say . . .

A God-given, in Christ Jesus, right to sleep “in heavenly peace”

. . .

“free from sorrow, free from sin” . . . “safe and secure” . . .

until that great and promised overlapping of heaven and earth

in which our God will make all things new . . .

that “great, gettin’-up day” in which there will be no more sorrow, no more

dying, no more tears.

“Do I have the right to sleep this long?”

I should say . . .

In Christ. All done.

Law-Gospel Theology and Family Life.

Colleagues,

Instead of more mining in Werner Elert’s monograph LAW AND GOSPEL (hinted at in last week’s post), here’s a “crossing” of that law/gospel theology with a slice of life today. Well, not quite today, but 17 years ago (1994), when graduate student Graham Harms and guest lecturer Ed Schroeder were in the same

place at the same time, namely, Luther Seminary in Adelaide, Australia in 1994. One piece of Graham's creative research that year was published already before the academic year closed in the seminary's LUTHERAN THEOLOGICAL JOURNAL. Editor of that journal in those days was John Strelan, whom some of you remember as keynote speaker at two of our Crossings international conferences.

Graham Harms, in these intervening years, has been professing more of the same—early on at the Lutheran Seminary in Sabah, Malaysia, and for the past decade in the Lutheran Church of Australia as Director of Ministry and Mission in Queensland. I discovered his article buried in my files, and asked Graham for permission to pass it on to you. He said OK and sent me his original text from way back then. Here it is.

Peace and Joy!
Ed Schroeder

**The Family under Law and Gospel:
An Ethical View of the Family from a Lutheran
Perspective
by Rev. Graham R. Harms**

Stocks in the Australian family are being quoted pretty low – there is even widespread fear that the family is headed for extinction in this country. We often hear cries for a return to 'traditional family values', whatever they are, while the population as a whole continues to vote against them with their feet (and whatever other parts of their bodies may be involved!).

What can evangelical ethics say about the supposed 'breakdown' of the family? Is a return to 'family values' possible or

desirable? What are family values? The present paper will attempt to come to terms with these and associated matters by discussing family life from an ethical point of view in the light of law and gospel.

NOMOLOGICAL STRUCTURE OF EXISTENCE

The family is one of those structures of human life, along with marriage, vocation and government, among others, which the Lutheran Reformation referred to as 'orders' or 'estates' (AC XVI).[1] It is one of the structures of our 'nomological' existence. This term as used by Werner Elert literally means 'law-measured existence' (gesetzmässige Existenz). It is everyday life in the old creation where God's Law is the key determining factor, where the standards are those of reward and retribution. So the family is a structure under 'law', under the kingdom of God's left hand, to use traditional Lutheran terminology, and thus applies to Christians and non-Christians alike.

HOW FAMILY LIFE IS SHAPED UNDER 'NOMOS'

'Nomos' [God's law] shapes human life, Christian and non-Christian, in three ways: it provides a setting for our life, a context of obligation and a context of evaluation. [2] The terms 'setting' and 'context' as used here imply a set of circumstances given or imposed from outside ourselves, and which is therefore unavoidable.

Under the first aspect of this law-shaped or nomological existence, we find ourselves in a family by accident of birth. God has not commanded us to be in a family; he has simply placed us in one.[3] We all find ourselves as the children of two parents – whether we know them or not – and we remain such for the whole of our lives, even if our parents divorce each other, disown us or die. Our human origins are by definition indelible

and unexchangeable. In some cases, we may also find ourselves with foster parents, or adoptive parents, or other guardians. Depending on which culture we find ourselves in, we may be brought up by grandparents or paid employees or government officials. Parents and other guardians stand 'in loco Dei' (Luther's Large Catechism).[4] They are all God's agents in the creation and preservation of human life, which is his good will (Gen 1:27-31).

The family is the context in which we are born, nurtured and brought to maturity so that, among other things, we in turn are ready to produce and nurture children of our own. It is also the context in which we first learn to relate to other people – to our parents, siblings, other relatives and those with whom our family are in relationship. It is this nurturing of children which constitutes the unique and essential feature of the 'order' of family, as distinguished from the order of marriage. We could define 'family' as ' a human grouping within which a child or children are nurtured and reared into independent adulthood'. So, my family consists of myself, my siblings, parents, grand-parents and so on. My family extends in two directions if I have children of my own, to include my descendants.

Our family is a gift from God, not something which we choose; it is an experience of God's love, which he pours out on the just and the unjust. However, it is not a gift of the gospel, but rather an endowment under the law, which obligates the receiver. This is a second aspect of the nomological shaping of our lives. Parents are responsible for the nurture of their children; children for obedience to their parents and love for their siblings; all stand under an 'ought' or obligation to fulfil God's intentions for the family. Indeed, this is one of our primary obligations, precisely because it comes to us from God himself, and so should take precedence over other, self-chosen

works.[5] Clearly, the health of any society, and the welfare of its members, depends to a large extent on how effectively these obligations are fulfilled. And any judgement of the rightness or effectiveness of family life will ultimately need to refer to the extent to which God's purposes of creation and preservation are being carried out. This leads us to the third aspect of the nomological shaping of human life.

The quality of our family life is also the subject of Law. As we live out our lives where 'we find ourselves', under the demand of obligations placed on us by our setting in a family, we are also evaluated as to the quality of our child-rearing and filial obedience. Like the other two contexts, this one is unavoidable, because it is woven into the very fabric of our life under the Law.

Because each family consists of sinners, it comes under God's judgement. Even the best of families consist of sinners so that the obligation to fulfil God's purposes in and through the family is never fully achieved. In this as in everything else, there is no-one without sin (John 8:7). Children disobey their parents; siblings fail in their obligation to love and support one another; parents fail to care for their children to a greater or less extent; families are all the scene of conflict engendered by the self turned in on itself. This is true of both Christians and non-Christians. Inasmuch as we have failed to be perfect in family life, we come under the judgement of God's law and are accused of sin. Furthermore, the family as a unit sins as it fails to achieve God's purposes.

PROVISIONAL STRUCTURE

So, although the family is God's creation and God's good gift to humanity, it cannot claim absolute value. At least four considerations should warn us not to treat it as an absolute or

to invest all our hopes for the reform of society in it. First, as already indicated, it is a context not only of human virtue, but also of human sin. Certainly, God has provided the family as a structure to order sinful human lives for our welfare,[6] to protect us from the destructive forces at large in the world, and so it is a good institution; but, as a structure inhabited by humans, it is also a medium for expressing those destructive forces which flow from our own hearts (Mk 7:21-23).[7] As with the nomological orders generally, it can even become demonized, good turned into evil.[8]

The family is also less than absolute because it is only one of a number of orders, all of them God's good gifts, which shape our lives and make demands on us – for instance, the order of marriage, which has close connections with that of family, but is different from it. A marriage is an important influence, if not determinant, of the quality of family life. In ideal circumstances, husband and wife are a team, each with a distinct but complementary share in the formation of their children – not least in their understanding of and attitudes towards sexuality and marriage. Children need both parents, and are impoverished by the loss of either or both, or by the withdrawal of either from the process of child-rearing.[9] The quality of the marriage can dramatically affect the quality of the family. The family is also affected by the order of the state. When parents fail to provide adequately for their children, the welfare authorities may intervene to ensure that they are properly fed, clothed and protected; in an extreme case, they may need to remove a child from the family in order to do that.

The family is also 'non-absolute' in respect to its shape. Family patterns are inevitably changing patterns. Every family, if it lasts long enough, goes through stages of establishing and developing relationships, bearing and raising of children, the 'empty nest' and a period of widowhood. Changes are also caused

in normal circumstances by geographic relocation, working hours, finances and the like. There is no divinely mandated morphology of the family.

The much-vaunted 'nuclear family', consisting of mother, father and their biological children, with father working outside the home and mother working in it, has become the standard model only since the industrial revolution. In agricultural societies, parents of both sexes were often engaged in field work, or in cottage industries in the home. Extended families have been more characteristic of earlier cultures, and many contemporary ones, and a wide variety of blended families has been the rule rather than the exception. It is interesting to note, for instance, that a greater proportion of 19th-century children in England lived in a household in which one of the original parents was no longer present than is the case today. Those disruptions were more likely to have been caused by death or desertion, while today divorce is the major cause.[10] The actual form which families take has changed from one culture to another and from one period to another. The changes which are currently under way are also, at least in part, adaptations to new conditions. But this does not constitute a break-down of the order established by God.

There is still another sense in which the family does not have absolute value, and that is in its nature as a temporary institution. In heaven, there will be no marriage or, presumably, family (Mk 12:25). Like the world itself, family will pass away. It is an emergency or interim measure to allow for the needs of sinful people in a fallen world.

THE 'CHRISTIAN FAMILY'

Is there any difference between a Christian family and any other kind? A Christian family is a family of the same sort as any

other, ruled under law, given by God for the creation and preservation of human life. Its essence is located in that creative and nurturing will of God for the good of humanity. Its distinction is simply that it contains one or more Christians. The faith of one spouse 'sanctifies' the other and the children (1 Cor 7:14).[11] Christian faith and freedom are to be lived out precisely in the orders, including the family, rather than in splendid isolation. In this way, Christian faith and freedom still need the family, among other orders, to come to an adequate expression in reality. Christian parents have the added opportunity, of course, to pass on the faith to their children. In this capacity they act as priests, or 'pastors', rather than simply as parents. Nevertheless, it is the responsibility of all parents to provide their children with education in values, both moral and spiritual, to teach them obedience to God (AC XXVI).[12]

THE CURRENT STATE OF FAMILY LIFE IN AUSTRALIA

Luther complained in the sixteenth century of the degeneration of family life in his time:

That is the way things go in the world now, as everyone complains. Both young and old are altogether wayward and unruly; they have no sense of modesty or honor; they do nothing until they are driven with blows; and they defame and depreciate one another behind their backs in any way they can. God therefore punishes them so that they sink into all kinds of trouble and misery. Neither can parents, as a rule, do very much; one fool trains another, and as they have lived, so live their children after them (LC).[13]

Similar complaints could be found in the writings of most periods of history before and since, but the family perdures. What is the current state of family life in Australia?

FAMILY SHAPE

In his recent book, REINVENTING AUSTRALIA: THE MIND AND MOOD OF AUSTRALIA IN THE 90'S, Hugh Mackay draws on up-to-date broad-based research to characterize Australia today as a society in transition, beset with acute anxiety about the redefinition of most of its central institutions. This anxiety doubtless affects family life, but is also caused to a large extent by the changes in the definition and nature of family life. His summary of the causes includes the redefinition of gender roles, a rising divorce rate, an increasing diversity in the shape of families, and changes in working conditions, the financial system, multiculturalism and the changing nature of Australian politics. This list covers most of the key 'orders', all of which are in a process of redefinition.

The anxiety arising from this overall situation of instability gives rise frequently to pessimistic prognosis for the future. One research project has discovered a general tendency for Australians to over-estimate difficulties in family life, and to assume that there is a breakdown of family structure greater than is actually the case.[14] This tendency was found to be closely linked with the influence of television, which, through selective reporting, appears to encourage a pessimistic view of family life in people of all social strata. The suggestion that the family as we know it is in imminent danger of extinction cannot, however, be supported from the evidence.

There certainly are indicators of a rising failure rate in family life. There is no need to document again the significant increase in the divorce rate over recent years, or to demonstrate the strain which this trend has imposed on the effective functioning of the family in the nurture of caring relationships. As a result, increasing numbers of children are losing the stability of their original family of birth and are

deprived of close relationships with one or both parents.[15] This is further exacerbated by the temporary nature of most single-parent families; these groupings tend to be temporary arrangements until the custodial parent enters a new relationship.[16] The resultant blended families are a further cause of stress, as new relationships need to be forged in settings for which our culture does not have well-established guidelines.

There is no doubt that a stable environment is beneficial for the raising of confident, competent children who grow through a reasonably happy adolescence into productive and fulfilled adulthood.[17] Other factors obviously influence the outcome of child-rearing – schools, employment prospects, media – but the general malaise among young people, including rising crime and suicide rates, suggests that family life is not adequately fulfilling its God-appointed purposes.

At the same time, the negative indicators should not be exaggerated. Some statistics suggest that the nuclear family is almost extinct, numbering only about 25% of families in Australia, if 'nuclear family' is defined as a married couple, only the husband working outside the home, and all surviving children still at home. This definition excludes extended families, and families with any children who have left home. In fact, fully 78% of Australian children live with both biological parents, currently married.

The typical Australian family has, indeed, some problems, and is undergoing changes which cause stress, but these difficulties do not amount to total breakdown of the institution. The majority of children grow up with their own, married parents, living in their own home, with the father employed and mother also employed when the children are all at school. In the typical family neither parent is alcoholic or a drug abuser. The

children grow into reasonably happy teenagers, with a low probability of major problems, and have a good chance of finishing school. There are additional difficulties if they live with a single parent (<10%) – they are less likely to finish school, and the family is more likely to be below the poverty line.[18] But the general prognosis for the family is that it is here to stay, as it adapts to new circumstances.

ABUSE IN FAMILIES

A disturbing phenomenon of Australian family life is an apparently widespread incidence of abusive and violent behaviour. According to a recent report tabled in the Queensland Parliament,[19] one in three households has experienced some sort of physical violence between partners, one in ten women is battered and 3%-4% of women are seriously and chronically physically battered. In 68% of cases children are also abused. As the report says, these statistics challenge the belief that the family is a haven of safety which nurtures and protects its members.[20]

The causes of this kind of behaviour are no doubt many and varied, but the result is clearly a transformation of the family from a context of nurture and love to one of fear and injury – physical, psychological, social and spiritual. The family has then been ‘demonized’ – transformed from a structure for God’s care of human lives to a structure, and even an instrument, of evil.[21]

Abuse in the family is not restricted to violent behaviour between the adults, but also frequently involves children as direct victims, as is by now well known. Many children grow up without the sense of safety which a home should provide, and many of them go on to perpetrate or participate in the abuse of their own children. Welfare departments are frequently dealing

with people who are in a third and fourth generation of succession of physical or sexual abuse.

FROM THE OLD ORDER TO THE NEW

The family and other nomological structures are precisely given by God to prevent this kind of abuse, in the first place, but then also to limit and punish it. The family often acts to restrict outright wickedness – most parents are discouraged from perpetrating neglect and abuse by the closeness of family relationships, the bonds of love that have been established, or at least by a sense of shame. But where the family fails to provide children with the protection they need, other ‘orders’ are provided as a corrective. Ultimately, the order of government (legal justice) is responsible for this role. No ‘right’ to family privacy or solidarity over-rides this legal authority, and erring parents should not count on the Church for the support of their cause against the agencies of the law – they are God’s own left hand.

Welfare departments are doing the work of God in this connection. Of course, they are subject to error, like any other ‘order’, and their potential for genuine solutions is limited. The removal of a child from the family, for instance, may halt the immediate abuse or negligence, but does not alter the underlying causes. Either the child must be kept away from the family permanently, or return to a probable resumption of abuse. If he or she continues under the care of the state, so-called ‘institutional abuse’ sometimes takes over where the familial abuse left off, and the child may be in a worse position than ever.

A more promising approach, which is sometimes attempted, is to provide counselling for the parent(s), or better, for the family as a unit. In the best approaches, the family is seen as a kind

of system (analogous to 'order'), which needs to be healed as a whole. Counselling has the potential to address the underlying motivations and to improve patterns of interaction between family members in a way which may overcome the immediate problems. This 'secular' therapy is part of God's left-handed healing apparatus and should always be part of the Church's approach to families who have lost their way. If we are dealing with people outside of Christ, this is about the limit of what can be done.

This does not yet address the root problem of family 'dysfunction', however, which is estrangement from God. It is really a problem of sin – and of judgement, of God's curse. That does not mean, of course, that conversion to Christianity immediately removes all the problems of family life, or that families involving Christians do not have such problems. But it does mean that while a family remains under God's judgement and curse, there is no possibility for a comprehensive solution.

The good news, however, is that Jesus Christ died to take the curse of sin on himself, and in the process gave to a world under that curse a righteousness which is not its own, but which signifies nevertheless genuine reconciliation with God. In Christ, the curse of God's judgement is lifted, peace with God is achieved and freedom is freely given. In Christ, new possibilities open up for those living in even the worst of families.

On the basis of this foundation, family members are free to leave behind the ghosts from the past, the fears, frustrations, and whatever else had bound them to their patterns of sinful behaviour, whether that behaviour has reached extreme proportions of abuse, or is simply lacking in perfection of love. Family members can now be motivated by faith in Christ instead of slavery to sin. The actions which flow out of faith,

namely, the fruits of the Holy Spirit, can renew family life beyond any human expectation (Gal 5:22-23). There is no intention here to indulge in utopianism or to overlook the real obstacles that still stand in the way of family wholeness – the continued tendency to slip back into the old slavery, for instance. No family, Christian or not, succeeds in functioning according to the fulness of God's plans or expectations. But the power of the Gospel is real, and its sphere of operation is in those places where God has placed us in this world, and so this is where the hope for families lies – in God's love enacting itself through faith in Christ.

This love liberates, within the family and beyond it. It opens the door for mutual support of family members in their work, education, leisure, personal development, faith, etc. It enables members to model for one another the faithful living out of relationships both within and outside the family.[22] It undergirds the family as an important training ground for developing attitudes towards life issues including marriage and family life, justice and responsible freedom. The special challenges of teenagers, mid-life crises and pre-menstrual tension, to mention a few, can be lovingly received and supported in this environment.

The family in which the Gospel is present is also free to serve the world around it. Other families in distress may be helped through the modelling of good family life, rendering assistance in emergencies and other acts of loving service. Christians will also bring the needs of such families to God in prayer – it is possible, by the power of the Spirit who produces these fruits of love, that the cycle of failure, rejection and a repeated pattern of dysfunction can be broken through such service. The family blessed by the Gospel may also be able to help other families in a wider sense by lobbying in the relevant places for government and societal support for family life, so that

families will be able to fulfil more effectively their God-given function of nurturing children. In this context it is not 'family values' which should be canvassed, but 'valuing the family' (Edgar).

PRESSURE FROM THE NEW ORDER

The picture is not complete, however, until we consider the family in the light of the new order of Christ's kingdom. The orders are interim structures, emergency measures to bridge the gap between the fall into sin and the eschaton. In this interim time, Christians live in the nomological orders, but also in the coming kingdom of Christ, which is future as to its fulfilment, but already present and active in the process of transforming reality to conform to its eternal goal.

In other words, the present nomological order is passing away. With respect to the family, Jesus himself already signalled that when indicating that there would be no family life in the resurrection (Mk 12:25). On another occasion he ignored his mother and brothers, and spoke of his followers as his 'mother and brothers', or family (Mk 3:34f). Family is also relativized when Jesus demands from his disciples a higher loyalty than they owe to their family members (Mt 10:37; Lk 14:26); duty to a father at work (Mk 1:20) and even responsibility for burying the dead (Lk 9:59f) are set aside as secondary. At Cana, Mary accepted her son's rebuke and obeyed him (Jn 2:4f) in a reversal of family roles, which are by nature unexchangeable. A similar undermining of the family order takes place when parents confess their sin to their children and receive absolution from them, or even when we confess our sin to God in the presence of one another, and receive the absolution together. The order of forgiveness ultimately subverts the nomological orders.[23] When parents and their children exchange Christ's forgiveness with one another, they become brothers and sisters, and the

nomological order of family has begun to pass away.

At the same time, Jesus supported the order as an interim measure – in his obedience to his earthly parents at the Temple (Lk 2:51), in his provision for his mother at the foot of the cross (Jn 19:26f) and in his admonition to obey the fourth commandment (Mk 7:10; 10:19).

At the end, the nomological family will be obsolete, and the only family will be that which gathers around the throne in heaven. In the interim period, the local church is God's family (Gal 1:2; 6:10; 1 Pet 2:17, etc), gathering people from every nation and every family (Rev 5:9), on their way home to the Father. People from strife-torn families, from dysfunctional families, from fractured families, even from demonized families can find a haven of peace in the Christian congregation. There, in the community of the forgiven, they can find the wholeness of life for which families were ordained, but can never achieve in this fallen world.

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1. Tappert, THE BOOK OF CONCORD, p. 38.
2. Elert, THE CHRISTIAN ETHOS, p. 56.
3. The fourth commandment is not a command to become a family, or to join one; it pre-supposes the existence of families and addressses itself to those who participate in this structure.
4. Tappert, pp. 379, 389.
5. Ibid. p. 380.
6. Ibid. p. 378; E. Schroeder, 'Family Ethos in the Light of

the Reformation', p. 107.

7. Thieliecke, THEOLOGICAL ETHICS, I:381.
8. Elert's definition, p. 76. This will be explored below.
9. Diana Bagnall, 'Children of a Lesser Mode'.
10. Ochiltree, CHILDREN IN AUSTRALIAN FAMILIES, p. 10.
11. Surely also the faith of a child also 'sanctifies' the family. It is not certain what St Paul meant by the term in this context, but it seems at least to have signified that the family is not an unholy or unfit context for a Christian to live in.
12. Tappert, p. 65.
13. Ibid., p. 382.
14. P. Noller & V. Callan, 'Images of the Typical Australian Family', in Funder, IMAGES OF AUSTRALIAN FAMILIES: APPROACHES AND PERCEPTIONS, p. 8.
15. Stability emerges as a key factor in effective family life in a number of studies, including Edgar, 'Family Values or Valuing the Family?'; H. Mackay, 'Australians at Home'; Bagnall.
16. Ochiltree, p. 10.
17. The nature of family life has been shown to affect the development of intelligence, emotional and mental health, including the incidence of drug abuse, physical health and social skills (Eastman, FAMILY: THE VITAL FACTOR – THE KEY TO SOCIETY'S SURVIVAL.pp. 4-39; Ochiltree pp. 20f).
18. Noller & Callahan, p. 19.
19. BEYOND THESE WALLS.
20. Ibid., p. 320.
21. It can be seen as an instrument, because the normal right to expect family solidarity, loyalty and privacy (right and proper in normal circumstances) are actually used to hide the abusive behaviour and therefore to prolong it.
22. A useful checklist of suggestions is provided in G.W. Sheek, THE WORD ON FAMILIES, pp. 119f.

Calvin/Luther conference at Luther Seminary (St. Paul, Minnesota)

Colleagues,

Funny thing happened at the very end of the Luther-and-Calvin conference at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota, earlier this month. [If you want to see the full program, google Calvin Studies Society, and click on “colloquium.” Also to find out who the scholar is mentioned in the next sentence.]

In the final session the speaker (the final one, number twelve) spoke early on about Werner Elert, whose name had never been mentioned before in the three-day event. It was Elert’s monograph on Law and Gospel (English translation by yours truly and published way back in 1967). So both of my ears twitched to hear his name mentioned as well as my translation. Significance of these 43 pages according to the speaker? a) Elert gave Luther’s genuine Law/Gospel theology a twist toward antinomianism, and b) that little booklet has had widespread influence in the USA Lutheranism.

I did groan, but when the presentation ended, I didn’t rise to object to both claims. It was the end of the conference that had been full of heady stuff. Everybody was tired. And the Elert issue was more an “aside” in this final presentation as the speaker then got to the heavy stuff of her lecture entitled “The

Game: Luther vs. Calvin.”

I had spoken once or twice from the gallery (maybe more!) during the three days. E.g., during the discussion of Luther and Calvin on prayer that came with one presentation, I suggested that Calvin commends Christians to pray in confidence of God’s providence, while for Luther it is confidence in God’s promise. The latter being fundamentally Christocentric, the former only incidentally so.

I also was twitched into saying something after the umpteenth recitation of the old saw: “Of course, Luther was no systematician.” So I trotted out my own aged saw of a wooden wagon wheel, which many of you have seen/heard before: In Luther’s theology the “system” is such a wagon wheel. [Definition of system: Multiple differentiated parts configured into a whole that functions as a unit.] The hub is the promising Gospel. All the theological “parts” are the wheel’s spokes anchored into the hub. The distinction between law and gospel is the rim that holds the doctrinal spokes fastened to the hub. Working with farm wagons in my early years—even learning how to grease the axle without taking the wheel off—all of this I “told ‘em” at the close of my intervention. I got no objections that such a wheel is a system, and even a few nods that maybe ML did have such a system.

After getting home I just had to say something about the Elert reference, so I posted this email to the speaker.

Dear Colleague, Your detailed analysis of the Barmen Declaration and its consequences was fascinating for me. Especially when you mentioned (early on) my teacher Werner Elert. I heard him “live” back in the early 1950s when I was Austauschstudent in Erlangen.

But I did twitch more than once when you evaluated Elert's monograph Gesetz und Evangelium. I did the E.T. on that one "anstandshalber" for my teacher. If I heard you aright—for we had no printed texts before us—you told us two things: a) Elert gave Luther's genuine Law/Gospel theology a twist toward antinomianism, and b) Elert's antinomianism has had widespread influence in American Lutheranism.

Both claims are untrue. Cannot be documented.

Take the second one first. I'll wager my entire Missouri Synod pension (100 dollars a month) that less than one out of ten clergy in US Lutheranism has even heard the name. And that less than 1% has ever read that modest monograph (or anything of Elert)—let alone agreed with him. So where's the documentation for his influence in US Lutheranism?

And for the first one, one-third of Elert's Ethics textbook (Erster Teil) is "Ethos unter dem Gesetz." And when you get to "Ethos unter der Gnade" (the next third), the only aspect of "Gesetz" that Christians are free from is the lex semper accusat. If that is anti-nomian, then so is the entire New Testament.

Elert an Antinomian?

"Gegen" Gottes Gesetz?

Bitte schön!

I heard his lectures live.

Elert is "anti-" the antinomians.

Where/what are the warrants for those two claims? Elert anti-nomian. Widespread influence in USA Lutheranism.

Sincerely,

Ed Schroeder

I received a friendly response, thanking me for the correction. But then came this line:

“Although I think his ideas about law and gospel are too much influenced by neo-Kantianism, I really appreciate his careful historical work in Morphologie des Luthertums.”

That “neo-Kantian” comment also made me twitch, even though the appreciation of Elert’s magnum opus the “Morphologie” was cheering. But not enough. Elert was a critic of the neo-Kantian way of reading Luther. In my dissertation (50 yrs ago) I sought to show that in Elert’s major works he disagrees with the neo-Kantians in their Luther-research, and offers his own “au contraire.”

But that’s an egghead’s debate, not exactly stuff for ThTh.

Now that I think about the conference again, I wish the last lecture had been the first. For that might have put law-and-gospel at center stage and led to discussion of the same-or-different between Calvin and Luther on the topic. It was a gathering of historians, and so the conversation centered on “look what Calvin or Luther said about this topic, and here’s how/why they came to those conclusions.” Seldom did the discussion move to ask: “If there is difference (or a congruence), what’s the significance of that difference (or congruence)?”

For that is the question raised in Elert’s 43-page booklet on Law and Gospel. Elert is arguing with the super-Calvinist of the 20th century, Karl Barth, and spells out the difference between Calvin and Luther on the L/G issue. Barth had goaded the Lutherans with an essay titled “Gospel and Law,” claiming that the Lutherans (Luther too) had gotten the sequence wrong. All

God's speaking to humankind is grace, fundamentally Good News, he claimed. Its grand finale, of course, is Christ. And after that came God's commandments—also graciously revealed—on how now to live that Gospel-grounded new life. So the sequence is gospel and law. Luther had it wrong.

Elert's L&G essay takes Barth on, not so much for the sequence, but for the "equal grace" Barth claims in both law and Gospel. And Calvin and Luther are always backstage, says Elert, for his debate with Barth.

Here are two paragraphs.

Barth had already presented his view of the issue in his 1935 monograph, "Gospel and Law." He states that law and gospel stand in a dialectical relationship. Absolutely correct. But the question remains what one means by dialectic. If one means thereby a dialectic of the substance, this would imply what we said at the outset, that when the one speaks the other is reduced to silence, and vice versa. Law and gospel speak contradictory lines and therefore can never talk in unison. According to Barth, however, law and gospel merely designate one and the same act of God, the content of which is always the same, although it is manifested in God's twofold manner of speaking. When God speaks in the law, it is simultaneously a promise, therefore also gospel. When God speaks in the gospel, on the other hand, he simultaneously expresses his demanding will, and therefore it is law. "The Law is nothing else than the necessary form of the Gospel, whose content is grace." The explanation for this reduction of the substantive dialectic of law and gospel to the verbal dialectic of form and content lies in Barth's statement: "The very fact that God speaks to us, that, under all circumstances, is, in itself, grace." The idea that God speaks only grace to man is a fundamental error. What God said to men at the beginning of world history as he

expelled them from the garden of their origin was not grace in the mind of the Old Testament narrator, but punishment! The statement of the decalogue about God visiting the iniquities of the fathers upon the children has the same significance. "God threatens to punish" is the way Luther interprets this, and without a doubt he is correct. The threats of the law CAN fulfill a pedagogical purpose and thereby stand in the service of God's grace, but they do not have to do so. And where they do not fulfill this purpose, they cannot be understood as grace. No exegesis can twist Isaiah's words about Assyria, Moab, and Egypt into declarations of grace for the victims. Or should the infants of Babylon destined to be dashed against the stones, and the women who were to be outraged, understand this somehow as the grace of God? With the statement that God speaks only grace, the divine law is rendered impotent.

That's a tidbit.

Deo volente, there'll be more of this in posts to come. Here's the reason why: It is not a tempest in a teapot, just theologians with nothing better to do. It is the elephant in the living room of many conflicts in church life and scholarly theology today. It always has been, as signaled by Elert's opening words in this Law/Gospel essay.

"For Paul the apostle a great deal was at stake, to say the least, in the proper distinction between law and gospel; for Luther, ultimately everything. For Paul, as well as for Luther, the very substance of law and gospel stand in dialectical opposition to each other. When the law speaks, the gospel is silent. When the gospel speaks, the law must hold its peace."

FYI, here are the section headings in Elert's booklet::

1. Need for a Clear Differentiation

2. "The Law Always Accuses"
3. Law as Security
4. Christ and the Gospel
5. The Meaning of Christ's Death
6. Life in Freedom
7. Is the Law Still Valid for Christians?
8. The Question of the Law's "Third Function."
9. A Critique of Calvin.

Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder

P.S. Just remembered this. Ed Krentz recently told me this, which I didn't know:

The notion of the law serving three functions – curb, mirror, and rule – comes out of Judaism (see Josephus, Against Apion).

Baptismal Identity

Colleagues,

Gloria Austerberry is a member of Augustana Lutheran Church in Omaha, Nebraska. Today's ThTh posting is her homily delivered there at last week's midweek Lenten service. When she was baptized, the name given her was Gloria Lohrmann. Yes, her brother is Marcus Lohrmann, Lutheran bishop in Ohio, the author of last week's ThTh 670. Good gospel theology must be in the genes. That is, in the regenerated genes post baptism.

Both Gloria and her husband Charles Austerberry were once in St. Louis. He was doing his Ph.D. here in town that gave him his

ticket to become professor of Molecular Biology and Protozoology(!) at Creighton University in Omaha. Gloria was working in the Nuclear Freeze movement at that time.

During those St. Louis days Gloria enrolled in the semester-long Crossings courses held at St. Mark's Lutheran Church, and both Chuck and Gloria participated in Crossings workshops. Unforgettable was one such course, Crossings from Luke: Bringing God's Peace to Earth, where Gloria with her peacenik knowledge, commitment and verbal skills sat at the seminar table right next to Larry Lemke, also articulate and theologically savvy, the head honcho for the F-16 (or was it 13, 14 or 15?) fighter program at McDonnell-Douglas Aircraft Corp. You should have been there to hear both of them link their daily work to the "peace laid in the manger."

Of course, you weren't, but what Gloria proclaimed to her congregation last week (remember, she's not the pastor) and now to all of us below is more of the same: Bringing God's Peace to Earth. Which word, "peace," you recall, was Jesus' first word to the fear-smitten disciples on that first Easter Sunday evening. So read on. Even though it's a Lenten meditation, Gloria is egging us on with Easter.

Peace and joy!

Ed Schroeder

This I Believe...My Worth is in my identity "Child of God," given at my Baptism.

Lenten Address at Augustana Lutheran Church, Omaha, NE, by Gloria Austerberry

April 13, 2011

Cross

*How beautiful we've made your cross,
A shield against our petty fears;
A yoke of steel around our necks
Much safer than your blood and tears. How fast we turn from
rough-hewn logs
Pretending holes from spikes aren't there
Ignoring splinters, stains, and dirt;
For such a cross is hard to bear.*

*How comforting our silver chains
How shine our steeples in the sky.
But beautiful are two charred logs
On which a Man once chose to die. – Larry Michaels*

What is the measure of a person? Sociologists say, money, power, and prestige determine worth in our culture. Well, we are all in this culture and have to live with its ways of deciding about us.

This I believe...that my worth, my value is in my identity "Child of God," given at my Baptism. I became God's kid, not just Hugo and Thelma's kid, that day. I shed the culture's way of discounting people that day and took on a new garment as my heritage. My faith – our faith – started in a tribe of Hebrew nomads and got passed on from generation to generation through a cloud of witnesses. Our forebears in the faith talked about God and to God and believed God was talking to them in their inherited stories and in their lives. They believed God became flesh in Jesus; they tried to think and act like Jesus. And so do we.

The season of Lent, that is, spring, came to be the season in

our Christian tradition when we seriously take stock of our faith. We put everything on the table here in a way we can't do in the other seasons. Perhaps we can do that because the green in the landscape and the blooming flowers are such a great consolation after the bleak winter. We consider: are we really any better than Jesus' friends who ran off afraid when Jesus' fate became apparent? Are we better than Peter, who said three times in one day he didn't even know Jesus? Would we be found in a crowd shouting "Crucify!"? An old song put it like this: "Will I deny him or crucify him? Will I ally with him? Will I stand by him?"

Lent is all about us – how we gather together, how we tell the stories of faith, and how we share our bread and soup and our bread and wine. If you were here last Sunday you were witness to a pretty new way of gathering here at Augustana, the way of welcoming all the diversity of gender preferences that are among us, in the gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender identifications. We had forgotten the stories of how Jesus went among all people, most often the hurting, the cast-aside, the poor, sick, and the lame. Sunday we stood and sang "We are straight and gay together, and we are singing, singing for our lives." We heard and sang new songs. This is what it means to get new wineskins for new wine – to devise changed ways of worshipping and living that convey more clearly what we are learning and what we want to do in God's world.

For way too long, we church folks have been too quick to judge others, too slow to welcome others. We followed cultural standards that have nothing to do with our faith identity as God's kids. We are the "Time for Burning" church, the church that in the 60's got caught on film for time and eternity acting the same way most of white American churches were acting – privileged, entitled to the best and the most of everything, and having an exclusive club. I think we are all still horrified at

the sin of arrogance, so obvious to us now, and its exposure. It makes no difference that I wasn't at Augustana in the 1960's. The same dynamic was everywhere – in Houston, Detroit, Chicago, and Cleveland. I know because I lived in or near those cities growing up.

[ES. Background. From Wikipedia. A Time for Burning is a 1966 American documentary film which explores the attempts of the minister of Augustana Lutheran Church in Omaha, Nebraska, to persuade his all-white congregation to reach out to “negro” Lutherans in the city's north side.

The film chronicles the relationship between the minister, the Rev. L. William Youngdahl, his white Lutheran parishioners and black Lutheran parishioners in the community. Youngdahl was the son of a former governor of Minnesota and federal judge, Luther Youngdahl. The film includes a meeting between Youngdahl and a black barber named Ernie Chambers who tells the minister that his Jesus is “contaminated.” At one point another Omaha Lutheran minister, the Rev. Walter E. Rowoldt, of Luther Memorial Lutheran Church, states that “This one lady said to me, pastor, she said, I want them to have everything I have, I want God to bless them as much as he blesses me, but, she says, pastor, I just can't be in the same room with them, it just bothers me.” Rev. Rowoldt and other ministers also discuss the concern that blacks moving into white neighborhoods will decrease property values.

The attempt to reach out does not succeed and Youngdahl resigns from his job as minister of the church.

In 2005, A Time for Burning was selected for preservation in the United States National Film Registry by the Library of Congress as being “culturally, historically, or aesthetically

significant.”

The black barber, Ernie Chambers, completed law school and was elected Senator to the Nebraska Legislature in 1970. By 2005 he had become the longest-serving state Senator in the history of Nebraska.]

When I was in college, I viewed that movie called “A Time for Burning.” Pastor Ewald Bash, Associate Director of the Youth Division of the American Lutheran Church, asked a group of us students, “If you belonged to this Augustana Church, what would you do now?” I didn’t even know where Omaha was on the map. Little did I know that more than thirty-five years later I would still be thinking about that question. I’m still a little mad at the people who most wanted to have their exclusive club, and a little mad at the ones who left because the church wasn’t acting quickly enough to open the doors wider. I’m mad at myself too, for my failure to grasp my true identity at any given moment. That is, my identity as one of God’s kids from Baptism, valued and loved by God and the family here God has given me.

We look forward to the lilies of Easter, no, we need the lilies to comfort our aching hearts. Yes, we are God’s kids, but we can think of things we’d rather keep hidden. The flaring trumpet flowers and the blaring brass music say to us “No need to hide anymore...Forgiveness and grace are the working words now.”

We do have a whole lot of history to try to make sense of when we prepare ourselves to finish the sentence “This I believe...” I want to understand the Bible in the light of modern scholarship. So, like many of you, I challenge old assumptions about the texts. However, our identity remains fast. My worth – your worth – our value together as a community of faith – it’s all rooted in God’s love for us and the stories we can tell because of that

love which has changed everything. I diligently memorized as a Lutheran 8th-grader a long list of questions and answers from Luther's Catechism. Anybody else ever do that before getting confirmed? What matters more to me now are questions about what justice could look like now – and here – in Omaha, Nebraska. Jesus' stories and our stories throw light on what God's Kingdom is all about. I will take the minutes remaining to me to talk about stories.

We always start Lent with the story of Jesus' temptations after his forty-day fast in the wilderness. Such a story! The devil – however we picture this being – tempts Jesus to turn the stones of the desert into loaves of bread. Not catching him there, Satan tells Jesus to throw himself down from the heights of the temple and test the power of the angels to save him from death. In spite of his physical hunger and human insecurities Jesus resists this. Then Satan tells Jesus that all earthly power will belong to him if he bows down to Satan. But Jesus resists the temptation to be the ultimate power-holder on earth! What a story! Well, that third temptation is not us! Or is it?

Do I have to get everything I want before I share with my neighbor who asks for help? Do the poor have to meet my standards for being deserving before I give them anything? Do I have expectations of others that keep me from seeing those whose customs are different from my own? Am I anything like the religious leaders of Jesus' day who looked at the blind Bartimaeus but never really saw him and did nothing to allow him dignity? More questions than answers, these days.

We have the story of Mary, possessed of a demon, as they said in those days. Jesus, instead of ignoring Mary because of her gender or her sickness, heard her pain, touched her, and healed her and blind Bartimaeus too. He risked the wrath of the religious leaders who couldn't bear any authority higher than

theirs. Their wrath did find its mark, you know.

We enjoy singing about how God “makes us shine with gentle justice,” as we just did in the evening’s anthem. However, justice hardly ever comes gently. You’d never say “gentle tornado!” Justice comes with birth pangs. It comes when we let tension sit there until we know what is right, what we have to do, who we have to talk to. Changing things to be more just will upset people who have to be in charge and maybe have to give up something.

As many of you know, Augustana Lutheran Church is a member organization of our coalition for community organizing, OTOC, Omaha Together One Community. Our involvement through the past 15 years has meant we pay annual dues and respond individually to fund appeals. But more importantly, it means that we are part of a storytelling scene that reports what is real in our lives and pays close attention even to difficult stories. This year Deb, Nathan, Ann, Mark, Chuck and I have represented Augustana in OTOC action teams in the areas of supporting a sense of community for refugees, workforce development (job training), youth enrichment, and neighborhood revitalization. Many more of you have attended public meetings in support of OTOC’s agenda. I just came from a meeting that is part of an ongoing leadership training series for refugee leaders within their various communities that Deb was helping lead. This Friday morning some will be standing with refugee families in their quest for safe, healthy housing, and I’ll be there too.(*)

More justice comes with OTOC’s involvement in the city budgetary process. We question the authority that says we can’t afford adequate publicly funded summer enrichment activities for children and youth. Or we can’t afford to help families get good schooling for their children or effective job training for adults.

Being God's kids, we come to the meal of bread and wine prepared for us each week when we gather. When we partake of Communion week after week, we re-enact that God's gifts are for all, for me, for you. Like Mary, Martha, and Lazarus of Bethany, we listen to God talk and follow God's image around until we get it.

I'd like to share with you the words from the hymn "The Summons" by John Bell. Listen as if God is talking to you.

*Will you leave yourself behind if I but call your name?
Will you care for cruel and kind and never be the same?
Will you risk the hostile stare, should your life attract or
scare?
Will you let me answer prayer in you and you in me? Will you let
the blinded see if I but call your name?
Will you set the prisoners free and never be the same?
Will you kiss the leper clean, and do such as this unseen,
And admit to what I mean in you and you in me?*

*Will you love the you you hide if I but call your name?
Will you quell the fear inside and never be the same?
Will you use the faith you've found to reshape the world
around,
Through my sight and touch and sound in you and you in me?*

We may decide to answer this way: "Lord...let me turn and follow you...where your love and footsteps show. Thus, I'll move and live and grow in you and you in me."

Remember these words from the book of Isaiah: "They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength. They shall mount up with wings like eagles. They shall run, and not be weary. They shall walk, and not faint." Is.40:31.

(*) Refugee families have been telling us stories about their living conditions. OTOC mediated between residents and the city housing code inspection office to designate a day when the city could inspect apartments, with the goal of improving conditions. Language barriers and fears of eviction had hampered open communication previously.

The Bible and Me. A Bishop's Tale.

Colleagues,

Marcus Lohrmann is bishop of the ELCA's Northwestern Ohio Synod. We've known each other since his seminary days in the 1970s. Later on he asked me to be involved in his doctoral degree program. Later still the two of us shared the high adventure of team-teaching in Hong Kong back in 1988. We worked with students at a Chinese missionary seminary. What did we teach? A Crossings course! Its title: Relocating Authority according to the Gospel of Matthew.

Students presented research papers at the end of that course "tracking" some segment of the wall-to-wall Confucian hierarchical authority systems shaping the society (and the churches!) in their local settings. The challenge then was to practice "crossing" those Confucian "authority OVER" structures with Jesus' own "authority UNDER" presented throughout the gospel of Matthew, culminating in 20:20ff. The final task was to work out the specs of Jesus' own counsel (Crossings steps 5 & 6)

for doing likewise in those wall-to-wall “authority over” structures of these students’ daily lives. Unfortunately we didn’t photocopy these papers for show-and-tell back home. Not smart. I’m remembering some that tackled Confucian authority in the students’ own Hong Kong churches. Yes, we should have brought them home for local consumption, nowadays for sure.

Last fall one of the other ELCA synods asked Marcus to tell them how he “does Bible.” Apparently the word is out among the ELCA bishops that Marcus has something worth listening to on the topic. You might even call it a case study in authority over vs. authority under, a bishop’s own slice-of-life. Here’s what he told them.

Peace and Joy!
Ed Schroeder

SOME REFLECTIONS ON THE SCRIPTURES, BIBLICAL AUTHORITY, AND THE WORD OF GOD

Why this particular topic now? As a person rooted in the Christian faith, I have had a lifelong interest in the Scriptures. Throughout my life there have been few days when I have not been exposed to or read the Bible. By the power of the Holy Spirit, this reading has shaped my faith and life and pointed me unambiguously to the God who has acted for me and the world in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ Jesus.

But I am aware that others are committed to the reading and studying of the Scriptures and identify it as being formative in their faith and life. They also are committed to the notion of Biblical authority. Yet that notion does not always lead to a convergence in theological thinking or unity with respect to the understanding of a variety of matters, including the person of

Christ, how one should respond to matters of war and peace, relationships between the sexes, and a host of other matters. Why is that? Even within the Lutheran tradition, there are different perspectives with respect to the role of women in the church, and the shape of interaction among Christians, among other things.

I suspect that people can use the term, Biblical authority, and mean vastly different things. We do not read the Scriptures in a vacuum. How does that impact our understanding of Biblical authority? If the Scriptures are the living word of God, how do we understand the Scriptures as dynamic with the Holy Spirit using that living word to continue to shape the life of the church? Here I would simply cite the matter of slavery, about which there was significant division in this country and within the church with both “sides” claiming the authority of the Scriptures to justify their perspective.

The immediate reason for writing this paper is prompted by the numerous conversations I have had in recent years within the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) and with other Christians as we have debated matters related to the will of God and human sexuality. The vast majority of folk in this conversation would seek to ground their perspective in the Scriptures, Biblical authority, and the Word of God. Admittedly, those who disagree might not be convinced by the “grounding” of the other.

For the purposes of this paper, I’m going to approach the matter as one who has been nurtured within the Lutheran tradition of the Christian faith and who “owns” the Confession of Faith contained in the constitution of the ELCA, including those sections pertaining to the understanding of the Scriptures.

This will not be an academic paper but an effort to help the

reader understand something about the manner in which this student of the Scriptures has wrestled with the Bible throughout my life in a manner which seeks to be faithful to my calling as a baptized child of God. In doing so, I seek to honor the Scriptures as the written Word of God which both confronts me with the reality of my own sin and the judgment of God but which also comforts me by the power of the Holy Spirit as that Word points me to the fullness of God's promises in Christ and consistently opens up a future that is shaped by the "new creation" in Christ Jesus.

A secondary goal is to share with my family, with those whom I have taught and pastored, and anyone interested, something of my faith pilgrimage as it pertains to my understanding of the Scriptures. In doing so, I acknowledge that this particular pilgrimage is not at an end.

SOME THINGS ONE NEVER FORGETS

Ours was a family that tended to the Scriptures. As one of ten children born to a father who was a Lutheran school teacher and a mother who was committed to her marriage and family, I was shaped by the daily reading of the Scriptures as a part of family devotions which followed the evening meal. The reading of the Scriptures, a written reflection on that Scripture that was age appropriate, and the singing of a hymn was part of the rhythm of each day. Skipping Sunday morning worship or Sunday School was never an option. With Dad at the organ bench and directing the choir, Mom would march us to one of the front pews. If Jesus could be in the synagogue weekly "as was his custom" so could we be in worship each Sunday morning. Daily family devotions, Sunday morning worship and Sunday School, and the studying of the Scriptures and the Lutheran tradition were all givens. On the latter point, for this particular student, it was hard to imagine the Christian tradition as extending beyond

the Lutheran church. Truth be told, however, I do not recall much conversation about what was read or taught. Mine was the role to receive and accept/believe that which was taught. With respect to the Scriptures, the operating perspective probably resembled the bumper sticker, "The Bible says it. I believe it. And that settles it."

The first challenge to such an understanding took place when I was about eight years old. The fact that I have recalled the story says something about how it disturbed me. Another friend and I were talking about how the world came to be. He was not too sure about the matter but he had heard something about evolution which did not make much sense to either of us at the time. I responded with certainty that God created the world. That did not make much sense to him either. I ran home, found my Bible, showed him the first verses of Scripture that declared, "In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth" and thought that would settle the matter. His response was, "Why should a person believe that?" That question was troubling and stuck with me for years.

I had my father as my teacher for five of my eight years of grade school. At some point during those years, he shocked me by saying, "Just because someone quotes the Bible, that does not make it true." Then with a degree of humor he quoted two passages from different places in the Bible. "Judas went out and hanged himself," and "Go, and do thou likewise." Dad must have been on a faith pilgrimage of his own with regard to the Scriptures. But with the quote he provided a simple but important lesson. "Don't be persuaded to a particular point of view just because someone is quoting the Bible." That seemed to me to complicate the earlier perspective.

THE BASICS OF THE CHRISTIAN FAITH, MEMORIZED AND RECITED

Catechism class introduced the basics of the Christian faith. I would not know for many years that the Small Catechism from which I learned the faith was a considerable enhancement to Martin Luther's Small Catechism using a question and answer format and considerable Biblical proof-texting for each article of faith. Truth be told, there was much good stuff to be learned and memorized, including portions that have stayed with me.

Interestingly enough, the first major section of the "Explanation" was on the Bible. "What is the Bible? The Bible is the Word of God." "Who wrote the Bible? Holy men of God wrote the Bible." "Why is the Bible the Word of God although it was written by men? The Bible is the Word of God because these men wrote it by inspiration of God?" II Timothy 3:16 is cited as the proof text. "What does 'by inspiration of God' mean? 'By inspiration of God' means that God the Holy Ghost moved the holy men to write, and put into their minds, the very thoughts which they expressed and the very words which they wrote. (Verbal Inspiration)" Proof texts are offered from John 17: 17 "Thy Word is truth," II Timothy 3:16 "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God" and John 10:35 "The Scriptures cannot be broken." As a child it was clear to me. The Bible is a perfect book to be "believed" in its entirety and also on an equivalent level. One verse is to be understood as authoritative as another. Yet there was an indication concerning what needed to have priority with respect to the Bible. "For what purpose did God give us the Bible? God gave us the Bible to make us 'wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus,' and to train us in holy living." The explanation continues, "What use should we make of the Bible? We should diligently and reverently read and study the Bible, listen attentively when it is read and explained, believe it, and live according to it." (Luther's

Small Catechism, Concordia Publishing House, pp. 40-42). The subsequent section introduced the concept of Law and Gospel.

For a junior high youth, this was meaty stuff. It promoted a "high view" of the Bible, of Biblical authority, and pointed to the importance of Christ. The stage was set for a perspective that begins with the "inspired Bible" that is "without error" and which moves to the task of determining appropriate teaching that is supported by "proof texts." But for this particular youth, the Bible was primarily the source book for that which must be believed. I, of course, would be taught the correct interpretation. Readiness for confirmation was indicated by the student's ability to answer the questions and provide the appropriate recitation of "proof texts." In this work I could excel.

I attended Lutheran high school and continued my study of the Scriptures. With that period came the discovery that not all are Lutheran. We lived in a Roman Catholic community. I occasionally argued religion with my neighborhood friends and was soon convinced that, though devout, they had succumbed to superstition and human tradition. I do not recall talking about religion with protestant youth. If asked, I would have recalled the book Church Through the Ages which indicated with certainty that the Lutheran tradition was in continuity with the apostolic tradition and all other manifestations of Christianity were diversions. Those who held such positions surely did not read the Bible correctly.

Here I first sensed the dilemma. If anything in this Bible could be challenged with respect to its truthfulness, then the whole faith system falls apart. The Christian faith is based on the premise of a perfect book. So in addition to believing the story of what God had done for me and the world in Jesus, I also needed to believe in a "seven day creation" and that Jonah was

really swallowed by a whale. Any apparent contradictions in the Bible needed to be dispelled. Nothing was taught about the uniqueness of each book, the manner in which books were identified to be a part of the Bible, how the Old and New Testaments would come to be regarded as authoritative, or points of tension within different books.

That all would have to wait until seminary. For now it was important to know what texts supported particular teaching and to be able to use those texts in debate with others who might challenge this perspective.

The underlying assumption was that the Christian faith is essentially a combination of teachings that come from the authoritative Bible. Faith was understood as believing these teachings and not questioning them. Among these teachings, the story of Jesus was obviously central and the most important. I recall the discomfort I felt in a high school religion class in which the teacher spoke with certainty about any matter that students raised. I thought to myself, "I don't believe what he is saying. I don't think he does either. If I am ever a teacher of religion and don't know the answer to a question, I am going to admit it."

THE CALL TO PASTORAL MINISTRY & THE CONTINUED WRESTLING WITH THE SCRIPTURES

Throughout my life I sensed that I was being called to be a pastor. In my senior year of high school my parents called me into the kitchen and inquired, "What do you want to do with your life?" I was surprised they did not know and responded, "I want to be a pastor." My father replied, "Why don't you think about becoming a doctor or lawyer or something else." In those days I did walk a mile to the bus stop. In the darkness of one such morning, I found myself saying, "If the story of what God has

done in Christ is true, it's worth staking my life upon it."

Theology and Biblical classes in junior college continued what I have come to call "the puzzle" model of theology. According to this model, one needs to get all the pieces of theology put together from an accurate reading of the Scriptures. Of course, the big piece is the story of Jesus.

In studying the gospels in detail for the first time I became aware of varying accounts of what appeared to be the same story told in different ways. I was not sure what to make of that. For a final exam I was asked to "harmonize" the accounts of the resurrection of Jesus. I wrote, "I don't think I should harmonize them. Each stands on its own." I do not recall being penalized for my response. But I do recall the anxiety traced to being asked to harmonize apparent discrepancies in the Bible. In another class taught by the college president we were considering the New Testament description of the antichrist. A substantial debate occurred concerning whether or not Martin Luther's judgment that the pope is the "antichrist" was true for every pope. Again, I found myself in turmoil. Is this another piece of Biblical teaching that I must believe to be a Lutheran pastor. When I finally asked the question, the professor reluctantly said, "No, it's an historical judgment." I was relieved but other members of the class were not so pleased with the professor's answer.

Senior college [=a separate institution for the last two collegiate years in the Missouri Synod pastoral education program] introduced me to critical thinking with the accompanying invitation to ask questions about faith and life. I now was adding Hebrew to Greek in terms of studying the Scriptures. I thoroughly enjoyed the studying of specific books of the Bible and the ability to ask questions about the text.

My seminary education would deepen my understanding of the development of the Bible, Biblical interpretation, and Lutheran theology. Professors had the ability to maintain a "high view" of the Scriptures, that is to value its authoritative nature while at the same time offering an invitation to probe the text. Students were introduced to the "historical-critical" method of studying scripture which included such matters as seeking to determine the nature of the "original manuscripts," contrasting literature that was contemporary to that of the Biblical text, literary studies of Scripture, as well as continuing to use some of the more "traditional" and accepted insights of archaeology to enhance Biblical understanding. I particularly enjoyed a course on the history of canonization, that is, how the Bible came to be in its present form. For the first time I learned about the process of how the Hebrew writings (Old Testament) came to be, how they were determined to be authoritative. Similarly, I learned something of the contexts which shaped the writings that came to be the New Testament. I learned something about how the early church determined which books would have authority for its life together. I learned that there was not always agreement about which books would be included. As the early church wrestled with such matters, questions were asked concerning the degree to which a book could be traced to the apostolic witness and whether or not the story of the crucified and risen Christ is central to the book. I recall being startled when a professor asked concerning the letters of Saint Paul, "What gives us the right to read someone else's mail?" By asking the question he was pointing to the bigger question concerning what makes these letters authoritative for us in our contexts. Such study was accompanied by conversations concerning the work of the Holy Spirit and the matter of the inspiration of these texts. I valued the fact that God works through the human story throughout history to convey God's story.

In all this it was clear that my teachers treasured the Scriptures and the process that shaped the development of the Bible as being that through which God works through human beings to tell the story of God's faithfulness to God's promises throughout the ages. It was also clear that the proclamation of the crucified and risen Christ was understood as being central to that story. My appreciation and love for the Scriptures increased. My anxiety about needing to "defend the Bible" diminished. I came to a deeper appreciation for the creation stories of Genesis 1 and 2, of the story of the Book of Ruth which recounts how people seek to act faithfully and lovingly in the most difficult of circumstances, of the book of Jonah which recounts human abhorrence to God's willingness to forgive even the enemy, of the prophets who declared God's judgment on any religion that separates worship of God from matters of justice, care for the poor, the orphaned, the widow and the stranger. I came to value the uniqueness of each of the four gospels addressed to specific communities and which lift up specific accents as the story of God's action in Christ Jesus unfolds.

At the same time courses in Lutheran theology helped me to see the distinctive lens through which Lutheran Christians view the Scriptures. In the "big picture" Lutheran Christians see the Bible first and foremost as being that written word of God through which God speaks judgment on all human efforts to find purpose, meaning, and life apart from God. It unfolds the story of how God takes that judgment into God's own being through the person and work of the crucified and risen Christ and how by the power of the Holy Spirit God is about the work of creating faith and making a "new creation." Such an understanding did not come easily. I had used the "puzzle model" for many years. In my first year of seminary I was bewildered by the fact that when I would write papers a certain professor would keep pushing me to go deeper. "What is 'good' about the 'good news'?" he would ask.

"What is new in this 'good news'?" Though I might be pleased with what I wrote, he was not pleased with cliches supported by Biblical verses. In the course of studying the Augsburg Confession and the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, I came to my own "aha" experience, particularly as reflected in Article IV. At root, Martin Luther and Phillip Melanchthon faulted a theology that made use of the Scriptures and the tradition but failed to make use of the crucified and risen Christ. The result of such a theology is that one can deceive oneself and others into believing that we can manage life on our own terms. To use the Biblical image, the "wrath of God" then abides on us. One is left with self-deception and/or despair. The Good News is the story of how God in Christ Jesus enters into human existence, bears in his person the fullness of human sin and the judgment of God and gives us "forgiveness of sins, life and salvation." Martin Luther's beloved term for that is the "joyful exchange." Jesus Christ takes upon himself our sin and the wrath of God and gifts us with his own righteousness.

I learned that Lutheran Christians would argue that this is not a novel approach but is affirmed by the witness of the crucified and risen Lord and the apostolic witness. For example, in the Gospel of John Jesus' opponents, who know the Scriptures well, question Jesus concerning his behavior and the authority by which he acts. Jesus responds, "You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that testify on my behalf. Yet you refuse to come to me to have life." (John 4:39-40) An exchange like that will get Jesus killed. Here I learned a critical lesson. One can know the Scriptures backwards and forwards. One can make all the claims in the world about allegiance to biblical authority. But if you miss out on Christ, you miss the whole point.

In the Gospel of Luke, the risen Lord greets the disciples on the road to Emmaus. They had hoped that he was the Messiah. But

the blatant evidence of Jesus' weakness, his failure, his crucifixion and death dash their hopes and leads them to despair. In their sorrow Jesus responds, "Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?" Luke continues: "Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted the things about himself in all the Scriptures." (Luke 24:26-27) In John's Gospel to know "Moses and the prophets" and to not know Christ is to not know Moses and the prophets.

The Gospel of John offers a similar key for its own interpretation and for the reading of Scripture. Why finally does John write what he writes? John responds, "Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name." (John 20:30-31)

SO WHAT?

The gift of this Christ-centered approach to the Scriptures and to Christian theology is that it always leads me to ask, "What about this text points me to the necessity of a crucified and risen Christ?" As I look at this text or face this particular situation or examine this matter related to faith and theology, how do I make use of the God who is for us in the crucified and risen Christ? In contrast, if I never get to that question, I may have an interesting class, a good debate, an inspirational message, or guidelines for life, but I have not yet shared the "good news" of the God who in Jesus, the Word made flesh, gave himself for the life of the world.

REVISITING THE CONFESSION OF FAITH OF THE ELCA

C2.02a. Jesus Christ is the Word of God incarnate, through whom everything was made and through whose life, death, and

resurrection God fashions a new creation.

Comment: What would it take for Lutheran Christians when they hear “Word of God” to think first and foremost about Jesus Christ? How might that change our conversations? Check out I Corinthians 1:30 for a Pauline equivalent to John 1. Other verses worth consideration include Hebrews 4:12 and Revelations 19:13.

C2.02b The proclamation of God’s message to us as both Law and Gospel is the Word of God, revealing judgment and mercy through word and deed, beginning with the Word in creation, continuing in the history of Israel, and centering in all its fullness in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

Comment: I have heard such preaching all my life. At its best, what I have heard astounds me, bewilders me, convicts me, and comforts me as I am finally pointed by the power of the Holy Spirit to the God who is for me and for all humanity in Christ Jesus. This is the Augsburg “Aha.”

C2.02c The canonical Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are the written Word of God. Inspired by God’s Spirit speaking through their authors, they record and announce God’s revelation centering in Jesus Christ. Through them God’s Spirit speaks to us to create and sustain faith and fellowship for service in the world.

Comment: In my days of doing youth ministry, prior to our appropriate attention to “boundary” matters, I would take youth out individually for a coke and conversation. On such an occasion one very bright teen asked me, “Pastor, why do you believe the Bible is the Word of God? What really makes it different from any other book?” I don’t know that I was ever asked that question quite so bluntly. This teen would simply not “buy” an answer from the catechism of my youth.

My response? “Beth, that is a very good question. I’ve read the Bible all my life. It claims me. I cannot let it go. I find it puzzling and intriguing. It reflects the best and the worst of human nature. I find it provides an accurate description of humanity in moments of great depravity and in moments of glorious fidelity. All of that is true. But on the deepest level it speaks to me in my doubt, and my unbelief, and my failure. It exposes my hypocrisies. More than that, it speaks of the God who is for me and for this world in the birth, life, death and resurrection of Christ Jesus. This is the God who in Christ Jesus meets me in my failure and unbelief and declares, ‘Peace be with you.’ And, it is. The Bible tells that story. That is why it is referred to as the written Word of God. Incredibly, it always has a way of speaking to me in a new way. I think that is the work of the Holy Spirit.

“Secondly, I believe that the Bible is the written Word of God because it is the testimony of the eyewitnesses of God’s action of judgment and mercy throughout history coming to its fulfillment in Christ Jesus. That is the word that God desires for me to believe, to trust.

“We need to keep rehearsing that story, to be reclaimed by it, as we wrestle with what God is doing in the world, in the church, and in our own lives. It provides a frame of reference at the center of which is the crucified and risen Christ who still breathes the life-giving breath of the Holy Spirit.”

C2.03 This church accepts the canonical Scriptures of the Old and New Testament as the inspired Word of God and the authoritative source and norm of its proclamation, faith, and life.

Comment: As we contend with what it means to be faithful, to be “transformed by Christ,” to use the language of St. Paul, this

is the story to which we need to return. Not only is this the “inspired Word,” but as it points us to what God is doing through the crucified and risen Christ Jesus, it is the means through which God breathes the life-giving Holy Spirit into us.

SO WHAT DOES NOT WORK FOR ME?

Anything that begins, “We are a Bible-based church” does not work for me. Or, sometimes I read in mobility papers, “My sermons are biblically based.” Such statements do not say a thing about one’s operative theology. One can quote the Bible and miss Christ. The devil certainly does! One can speak about Jesus as “model” and leave the hearer in despair. My father was right, “Just because someone quotes the Bible does not mean that what the person is saying is true,” either to the intent of the text or to God’s ultimate intention in Christ Jesus.

“I believe in the inspired, inerrant Bible.” The Bible is never meant to be an object of belief in and of itself. Such a statement does not guarantee a thing with respect to what one is teaching. Southern Baptists, Pentecostals, Jehovah’s Witness and the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod all make similar statements. Yet the theology that is offered is vastly different.

Conversations and claims about Biblical authority that are Christ-less do not work for me. In recent years I have been struck by the number of conversations about Biblical authority that never mention the name of Jesus. In my experience, such conversation is finally Law. In such cases, the Bible is being used to provide direction, usually to someone other than the speaker. But others may notice that, in the process, the one who speaks is entering into condemnation. One person recently wrote to me, “Bishop, I don’t want to hear anything more about love. This issue is about the authority of the Bible.”

Congregations and leaders who argue about the Bible but who

clearly are not reading/studying it with an eye for Christ trouble me. I simply lament the fact that in so many Lutheran congregations there is an absence of pastoral teaching and a commitment to make use of the witness of the Scriptures in shaping the faith and life of individuals and congregations. Similarly, I lament the fact that in many of our congregations worship services use only one Scripture lesson. Typically what is lost includes Old Testament Readings, Psalms, and particular passages that one may wish to avoid.

SEVERAL TOOLS

Throughout the years I have found it useful to use several tools to “check out” my teaching and preaching with respect to the central task of necessitating, making use, of Jesus’ death and resurrection, as I approach a particular text or issue. One such tool was developed by two of my teachers, Edward Schroeder and the now sainted Robert Bertram . It approaches a text by asking:

1. What is the surface symptom that indicates “dis-ease”?
2. What is the deeper issue that is reflected in the situation? What illustrates the faith that is misplaced or misdirected?
3. In what way is that a “God-sized” problem that indicates our invitation to God’s judgment?
4. What has God done in the crucified and risen Christ to speak to that word of judgment?
5. How does that begin by the power of the Holy Spirit to properly locate faith in the God who has acted for us in Christ Jesus?
6. What is the spirit-given “fruit” that replaces the “dis-ease” that opened the discussion and which indicates a new reality?

Check out www.crossings.org for more details.

A second tool was developed by a friend of mine, Pastor Dennis Maurer. As he looks at a text or a situation, he asks, “What is God’s intention for us?” Then he asks, “What keeps that from happening?” His third question is, “What has God in Christ Jesus done through the cross and resurrection to move us by the power of the Holy Spirit towards God’s intention?” Finally, he asks, “What difference does that make?”

Presented: Southwestern Pennsylvania Synod (ELCA)

September 23, 2010

Anticipating Easter in a Eulogy during Lent

Colleagues,

M. Douglas Meeks is a dear friend. In the days of Seminex he was teaching at Eden Seminary (UCC) here in town. Eden opened its doors to us when the doors shut at Concordia Seminary. We partnered in projects. Once during that time, when Doug was on sabbatical leave, Eden asked me to teach “his” course in systematic theology. So some not-so-crypto-Lutheran accents got into the mix alongside the heritage of John and Charles Wesley that continues in the life and work of Doug Meeks—not only here in the USA but throughout the worldwide Methodist community. But then it was Luther’s own introduction to the Epistle of Romans which “strangely warmed” John Wesley’s heart upon first reading.

But Doug is not only a Wesley scholar. He studied under Juergen Moltmann in Tuebingen and was a major mover in introducing Moltmann to the English-speaking world.

Here are the official specs:

M. Douglas Meeks

Cal Turner Chancellor Professor of Theology and Wesleyan Studies

Director, United Methodist Programs

Director, The Turner Center for Church Leadership

Vanderbilt University Divinity School

Nashville, TN 37240

If you wish to know more about him, google his name.

In February Marie and I were guests of Doug and Blair Meeks at their home in Nashville, Tennessee. We learned about his brother John, at that time in hospice care. He sent us this "In Memoriam" for John just a few days ago. With his permission I pass it on to you.

Peace and joy!

Ed Schroeder

In Memoriam

John Edgar Meeks

By M. Douglas Meeks

Andrew Price United Methodist Church

March 26, 2011

The agony of John's battle with leukemia was interrupted three Sundays ago by a joyous day on which he was clear and energetic – a precious memory we shall always treasure. Marilyn, his sons and daughters-in-law, and his siblings gathered around his bed. Because John's voice did not have its usual resonance each of us took turns leaning over to have a conversation with him and to

be kissed by him. In my conversation with John he said, "You know in all of this I am teaching you all." The obvious implication was that John was teaching us how to die. I said, "Yes, that's true, but you must know that all these years you have been teaching us how to live."

John was a consummate teacher who loved life. He was a teacher of life. He was, it seemed to me, a teacher for everyone he met and he met each of us with just what we needed to learn in order to fall in love with life. A theologian like me is a poor sort of person who needs constant teaching to save me from my academic abstractions. Every once in a while he would ask me the question, "What do you do all day anyway?" It's a good question for a theologian and, I guess, for anyone who wants to live life more fully. But no matter what criticism John had to offer, he always gave us an acquittal and never failed to say in one way or another what Christ says to us all: "I forgive you. I love you."

Friday last week there was a visitation before the Service of Death and Resurrection at Collierville UMC. The reception line lasted nearly four hours and reached out to the street. The outpouring of love for John astounded me. How could one person be loved by so many people? John had at least six professions during his life: soldier, teacher of history, football and track coach, school administrator, alderman on the city council, and pastor. As the wide circle of friends, former students and football players, members of his congregations, and colleagues in each of these professions came through the receiving line I heard some themes repeated over and over : "he was the best teacher I ever had," "he saved my life," "he helped me believe in myself and got me into college," "he made our workplace more human," "when I was addicted, he was the only person I could trust," and "I wanted to shoot the bishop when he moved John from our church."

John's spheres of teaching were immense, but the one in which he most excelled was his own family. John and Marilyn had a fierce loyalty to each other and a deep love for each other, and that made them a life-giving teaching team for their sons Marcus, Matthew, and Benjamin and in recent years their beautiful daughters-in-law Rachel, Libby, and Patrice. John had a wonderful way of teaching without presumption or bombast. He said exactly what he thought and felt without embellishing it or qualifying it with academic irony. John, like the prophets, taught us with everyday gestures in everyday life situations. He taught us with the acts of gardening, coaching, fishing, cooking, and dancing. The gestures of his teaching often jarred us and made us have second thoughts about how we were conducting our lives.

Two days after John and Marilyn found out that he had acute leukemia he entered the hospital to begin treatment. Those days were filled with anxiety and apprehension of what lay ahead. But the last thing John did before leaving for the hospital was tie up his tomato plants. It was not something I would have done. As I have reflected on it, this was an act of hope; it was an act of life in the face of death. Tomato plants have to be taken care of in expectation of their harvest. John taught us that the little acts of hope show forth our large hope in God's future. Tie up your tomato plants, no matter how bleak things are, because God's promises for God's future are true and faithful.

You couldn't stop John from coaching. Football was in his blood. He played at UT and I at Vanderbilt. When we watched the games, I used to tell him it was more virtuous to root for Vanderbilt because that taught you long-suffering. If anyone at a party gave the slightest prompting John would get up and give detailed coaching instructions on a football cross block and when he stretched out his body to demonstrate, he took up the whole room. John taught us that pastoring is like coaching. Coaching

is a matter of saying what we should do and showing how. John thought that when you spoke the gospel you had to show how to do it by doing it yourself; don't just do what I say but also what I do.

John was an inveterate fisherman. When the Meeks-Upchurch clan gathered yearly at the Cowpasture River on the Virginia farm that is in Blair's family, John would invariably come with his van expertly packed to the brim with fishing and cooking equipment. John was a serious, scientific fisherman. He thought anything worth doing must be done with excellence. I was quite satisfied with my way of fishing which was to lie on the raft reading the New York Times and sipping Mountain Dew, waiting to swat a horsefly that came too near; and I took great pride in the fact that I occasionally caught a fish. But John said I was a disgrace to the arts and sciences of fishing.

Through his fishing John was trying to teach us the patience of communing for long hours with the fish and all other creatures of the river, the discipline of taking time and not rushing life, the art of casting and contemplating. And when he started, as the New Testament says, fishing for human beings, he applied the same devotion to excellence and patient waiting, gently casting the gospel and waiting for the Spirit to give people new life. There are no short cuts in good fishing and no short cuts in being a minister. The people in his congregations knew that he gave everything he had all of the time and with all the excellence he could muster.

John was not only a great fisherman; he actually cleaned and cooked the fish and prepared all the fixings of the feast. Over and over again he taught us how important to the soul is life at table over a good meal. His cooking nourished our bodies; his Spirit nourished our souls. John was a great believer in Methodist pot-luck dinners as all the members of his churches

knew: Rossville, Moscow, St Matthews, and Andrew Price. At St Matthews John could be found every week with our brother Bob and John's son Ben preparing a meal for the congregation.

John loved the sacraments of the church. When he presided at the Lord's Table he delighted in God's nourishment of the life of God's people. Our son, John William (the namesake of John Edgar), wrote these sentences about his uncle: "I know of no single human being on this planet who has made a meal of his faith more than John Edgar Meeks. Sounds like hyperbole, but it's incredibly easy to say. If you watched him pray he was not demonstrating or peacocking, he was praying. He was not pontificating or philosophizing, he was praying. He was not begging or acquiescing, he was praying. I know about theology from my father, I know about prayer from my uncle. I don't know that I'll resolve my issues with faith before I die, but that will be on me, not because I was not surrounded by faith. That is a gift and I know it."

When he had to take disability leave last summer John said there were two things he wanted to continue: his teaching of spirituality and his visiting of the prison. He took the Lord's command to visit the prisoners with utter seriousness. Last Christmas in a healthy interlude between chemo treatments John was on death row at Riverbend Prison handing out Christmas presents. Over the years John and Marilyn have spent many weekends in the prisons of west and middle Tennessee bringing the gospel's message of peace and hope and freedom. This semester I am teaching a theology course in Riverbend Prison, and since John's death one of the greatest consolations for me is to hear from prisoners their profound gratitude to John for witnessing so faithfully to God's gift of life in a place that promotes despair.

Finally, John was a dancer. As he did in gardening, coaching,

fishing, and cooking John danced for the sheer joy of it. His dancing was a sight to behold. John was a lot bigger than I, but somehow God had created in his body a rhythm for the celebration of life. He had music in his bones. Blair sat by his bed in the hospital and sang hymns with John. Sometimes in these last weeks all he could do was mouth the words and keep time with his fingers. But in earlier days if John heard any music with a decent beat he would be up dancing, no matter where he was, and you just had to be prepared for him to pop up in the aisle of a theater, or anywhere else, and swing with the music. You just couldn't stop him. Except for my sister Joyce no one else in our generation has this rhythm, and not many in the second generation. But at Sherry and Bob's wedding two summers ago John's grandchildren and nephews and nieces, from age two to fifteen, followed the pastor turned dancer on the dance floor and danced their hearts out.

When John danced we knew he was compelled by the resurrection music, by God's power over death. And when you saw John dancing you knew that the church should be dancing because if the resurrection is real, there is no way to respond to it except by dancing. In medieval art the risen Jesus is depicted as dancing with his robes flowing out to embrace all the dead and bring them into the life of God. We have given John to this Jesus, this dancing Jesus victorious over death, in whom we trust that God's power over death will make all bodies, the lame and the limber bodies, the cancerous and healthy bodies, the underfed and the overfed bodies, the bent low and the too proud bodies, dance in joy. And there in the midst of this dancing you will find John Edgar Meeks delighting in God's joy.

Amen.

The Crossings Curriculum of 1983-93 (Continued) with a Spinoff on Atonement Theories!

Colleagues,

In response to last week's show-and-tell about the Crossings courses of ancient days some of you (not a groundswell, but one did come from Mexico!) think the Crossings board should think about making some of these courses available online. Crossings prez Steve Kuhl says it's on the agenda. That got me snooping through the one file-cabinet drawer chockablock with manila folders from those 21 courses. Also to remembering more items from that era.

For example, Bob Bertram's noting that if/when a student had taken ten—any ten—of these three-credit courses (the equivalent of one academic year at a seminary) she would have this on her transcript: studied ten books of the Bible, learned about 10 significant eras/movements in church history, come to terms with ten different samples of contemporary theology, AND written 10 essays practicing her skill in crossing this theology over into ten slices-of-life in her world today.

What seminary in the world, asked Bob, a seminary professor himself for half of his lifespan, offers anything like this to students in their first year curriculum? [Answer; none.] So maybe Crossings Courses Online is not a bad idea.

Back to those 21 fat file folders. Some stuff I found:

ADDITIONAL TITLES FOR STUDENT ESSAYS

crossing a slice-of-life-today with the theology we studied#503

Crossings from II Corinthians 5: Righting History's Wrongs

- *God in Christ Reconciling the World of Nuclear Threat*
- *Death and Resurrection in the Computer Revolution*
- *The "Structurally Unemployed:" Their Alienation and "Reconciliation"*
- *"Making His Appeal Through Us:" Advertising and Ambassadorship*
- *Managerial Efficiency and the Christian Apostolate*
- *Must Play Be Work, May Work – Even Cruciform Work – Be Play?*
- *"That We Might Become the Righteousness of God": A Clue for Family Therapy*
- *From Bulemia to Boldness for Loving: A Life Story*
- *Assertiveness Training and 2 Corinthians 5*

#508 Crossings from Philippians: Winning by Losing

- *Health Care Technology and Right to Die*
- *Winning by Losing in Coping with AIDS*

#510 Crossings from Acts: Hearing the Healing

- *Neurosis: A Block to Hearing the Healing*
- *Hearing the Healing Through Art*
- *Hearing the Healing Though Educationally Handicapped*
- *Hearing the Healing In the Face of Grief*

#512 Crossings from 1 Corinthians: Power and Wisdom Up Against the Cross

- *Theology of the Cross in John Chrysostom and Thomas*

Merton

*#515 Crossings from Favorite Biblical Texts of the Reformation:
Locating Good News That's Trustworthy*

- *Reformation Theology and Ordaining Gays and Lesbians*
- *Crossing Modern Pop Culture with the Reformers' Favorite Biblical Texts*

#519 Crossings from Genesis: From Creation to New Creation

- *New Creation in "A Handmaid's Tale"*
- *New / Old Creation on the Names of God*

And that leads to the spinoff on atonement theories. How, pray tell, you ask, does that happen? Well, like this:

Tucked away in those archival files was this sheet:

"The Crossings Curriculum – A Three-Column Summary of Problem & Solution Central to Each Course

Biblical Book	Issue	The Good News for this Issue
501 Luke.	Conflict/Disorder.	The Peace on Earth at Bethlehem
502 Isaiah	Chronic Injustice	Mercy in God's Suffering Justice
503 II Cor.	Wrong-doing	Making Our Wrongs Right
504 John	Confused Priorities	New Birth/New Priorities
505 Matt.	Authority Conflicts	Upside-Down Authority
506 Psalms	Rejection	How God Rehabs Rejects
507 Eph.	Despair/Depression	Hope that Succeeds

508 Phil.	Losers	Winning by Losing
509 Hebrews	Burnout	Christ's Self-sacrifice Success
510 Acts	Cry for Healing	Hearing the Spirit's Healing
511 I Peter	Shame & Suffering	Unshaming the Suffering
512 1 Cor.	Hi-Tech Culture	Hooking Culture to the Cross
513 Revelation	Apocalypse Now	Survival
514 Romans	Daily Life Legalism	A Faith that Has what it Takes
515 Ref.texts	"Other Gospels"	A Foundation You can Trust
516 2 Cor.	Life without Spirit	Holy Spirit & Human Spirit
517 Galatians	Ethics	Freedom
518 Mark	Nobody-ness	How to Become Somebody
519 Genesis	Creation	New Creation
520 Acts	World Religions	The Gospel's Promise
521 Psalms	Alienation	Acceptance

Reflection.

Inside every one of these issue/solution pairs is an atonement model that widely expands the so-called "classical" atonement models of Anselm, Irenaeus and Abelard: Christ the Substitute, Christ the Victor, Christ the Moral Role.Model. And the reason behind that is that the Scriptures themselves are manifold in the metaphors, theories [Remember the Greek word *theoria* is a visual word. Means a picture, a viewing], images used to communicate what was "good and new" about the "Good News" of the crucified and risen Messiah. There are many theories/pictures—way more than the alleged classics—already in

the Bible of the transaction soon to be commemorated in Holy Week and Easter. And there's no reason not to expect more. Blessed Bob's "sweet swap," for instance.

Some time ago I posted this list of samples for going beyond the standard three:

*Thus for the BAD NEWS of guilt, it's the GOOD NEWS of Christ as forgiveness;
for shame, the GOOD NEWS of Christ is acceptance;
for enslavement, the GOOD NEWS of Christ is freedom;
for death, the GOOD NEWS of Christ is his conquest of death;
for oppression, the GOOD NEWS of Christ is rescue and liberation;
for despair/depression, the GOOD NEWS of Christ is hope;
for fear, the GOOD NEWS of Christ is an invitation to faith:
"Fear not, just trust me."
for do-gooder works-righteousness, the GOOD NEWS is free (gift) righteousness, and so on.*

In each one of these is a different picture, different theory, and every one of them moves from bad news to good news via Holy Week and Easter. They are all imaging Christ's death and resurrection.

Gustav Aulen, a 20th century proponent of the Christus Victor atonement theory as the "best one,"[in his 1931 book by that title], claims Luther to be in that tradition. That is true, but that is not the whole truth. Luther is all over the map on atonement theories. And no wonder, since his full-time job was interpreting the Bible at Wittenberg university, he was all over the map because his textbook was all over the map on atonement images..

Take a look at the one paragraph in Luther's Small

Catechism—referenced here four weeks ago, TT 663—on the meaning of the second article of the Apostles Creed—with my [bracketed] addenda.

“I believe that Jesus Christ, true God begotten of the Father from eternity, and also true man born of the virgin Mary, is my Lord [lordship is an ownership term]. He has redeemed me [ownership transfer], a lost [needing to be found] and condemned sinner[under judgment, in need of forgiveness] purchased [ownership transfer] and won me from death and from the power of the devil [Christus victor] , not with gold or silver, but with his holy precious blood and his innocent suffering and death [cultic sacrifice], so that I may be his own [ownership transfer again] and live under him in his kingdom [regime change] and serve him [new master] in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness [purity replacing impurity]; even as he is risen from the dead, lives and reigns to all eternity [life that lasts vs. death that terminates]. This is most certainly true.”

One of the vexations for some theologians in current atonement theory debates is that God the Father comes off as an abusive parent in compelling the Son to suffer and die for sinners. The mistake here is the Arian notion of the Trinity haunting this objection. Arian in the sense that the Son is not within the Godhead, but some less-than-God agent on the receiving end of action from the deity.

Not so orthodox Trinitarian theology. If the Nicene creed means what it says, the second person of the Trinity is “God of God, yes, very God of very God.” Couldn’t be more God-full. With the full deity of the trinitarian Son now incarnate in Jesus, it is God the Son, not God the Father’s demi-deity subordinate, going to the cross on his own volition, not compelled by some deity

beyond himself.

In the words of Paul Gerhardt's Lenten hymn:

*The Lamb of God—the Lamb who IS God—goes uncomplaining forth,
Our guilty burden bearing;
And laden with the sins of earth,
None else the burden sharing.
Goes patient on, grows weak and faith,
To slaughter led without complaint,
That spotless life to offer:
Bears shame and stripes and wounds and death,
Anguish and mockery and saith,
“WILLING all this I suffer.”*

Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder