

# Easter Sunday Preaching

Colleagues,

Pastors all around the world are beset at the moment with the heaviest preaching burden of the year. The great majority of them have a minimum of three key messages to deliver, one today on Maundy Thursday, the next tomorrow on Good Friday, the third on Easter Sunday. Each is different in character. Each cuts to the core of the Christian Gospel and the heart of the pastoral calling. If you make a hash of these it's time to quit. Call the elders or council together and hand in the keys to the pulpit. So thinks the preacher with a conscience, at any rate.

Said conscientious preacher, I'm guessing, is sweating especially hard about now over the forthcoming Easter sermon. Let's hope so, at least. How it is in the rest of the world I cannot say, but in the U.S. preachers will be looking at their biggest crowds of the year this Sunday. Come then the questions. How do you reach them? Of the nuggets you mine from Mark or John (assuming you follow the lectionary), which will you try to tell as of first importance to this set of people? And how in the telling will you best serve the Holy Spirit's aim of grabbing ears, lifting hearts, and injecting dying sinners with sturdy hope in the God who raised his Son from the dead for them all, not just the regulars, but the once-a-year types too? Any chance while you're at it that you'll tempt one of the latter to start checking in a tad more often? Christ no doubt would be deeply pleased to see that.

And with questions comes the problem. Sermon preparation is for most of us a lonely exercise. That's certainly how this preacher has experienced it for 30+ years. We browse our books, chat up our colleagues, check out the current text study at [crossings.org](http://crossings.org) (well, I hope you do), but then, inevitably, come

the conversations within our own heads. It's from these that the sermon spills. How well or poorly it manages to feed the flock we're invariably left to wonder, in part because the folks we serve it to are loathe to comment on its quality. That's especially so of the part-timers, the ones one most hopes to reach on Easter Sunday because they won't be there on Easter 2. So the preacher gropes. And the younger the preacher the more the groping. With older hands there's at least a chance that a fragment or two of useful feedback has drifted his or her way from hearers over the years, though even then one thrashes. Inevitably.

It's with the above in mind that we bring you today's offering. Think of it as pre-preaching feedback for Easter Sunday preachers. I got it from two sources. First, and of greater significance, from veteran listeners, a handful of people I know and honor as steadfast saints who can't recall an Easter Sunday when they weren't in church. Earlier this week I asked them to "tell me in 50 words or less...what you want Easter preachers to be thinking about as they prepare for Sunday? Or to put that another way, what's your tip for them if they're going to get the job done the way it needs to be done where Easter Sunday hearers are concerned?" Almost everyone I asked responded with alacrity. Hardly any managed to do so in under 50 words. So be it. In Section I below you'll find what they said.

Section II delivers some comments from a few veteran preachers, of whom I asked: "What counsel (50 words or less) do [you Easter-preaching vets] have for young preachers just starting off, or maybe for each other?" Again, responses came quickly. The first to answer was my bishop, Elizabeth Eaton of the ELCA's Northeastern Ohio Synod. I'm especially pleased to pass along what she had to say.

God guide the telling and bless the hearing this Sunday,

wherever it happens.

Peace and Joy,  
Jerry Burce, for the editorial team

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I. On Easter Preaching, by some Veteran Hearers  
+ From a Lutheran middle-school teacher, late 50's, Associate in Ministry (ELCA)–

*"I want to hear pure JOY. I want to get excited about the incredible work that the Father accomplished through his Son. I want to be reminded, encouraged, and challenged to live as a grateful person who has been given the gift of salvation. I want to hear the name of Jesus spoken with confidence and joy multiple times during the sermon. I want my pastor to smile and have his/her eyes light up when proclaiming this incredible message."*

+ From a spouse, mother, and late-blooming entrepreneur, early 50's, coincidentally a great-granddaughter of LCMS patriarch and dogmatician Francis Pieper–

*"A great Easter sermon shouts shocking, unthinkable, nearly unhope-able news– death will not win the day. God has turned the way things work upside down and He has gone to graphic lengths to make it so. Not at a blip on the timeline, but carefully planned and anticipated since the beginning of time. His plan and He saw me in it, and, then, what need I fear? And not just a happy ending, but triumph for now. I can leave behind the cloaks of sorrow and selfishness and fear for I am Christ's and Christ is God's. I pray that the pews are littered with such cloaks when the postlude fires up!" Another thing that I personally thrill over is hearing deeper meanings in root words, cultural insights, and details in the accounts that I*

*have never considered before. Not only for the depth it adds to the accounts, but for the wonder of glimpsing the tapestry God has woven in His Word and in His Plan. Alive and inexhaustible—and available to me. Who knew?”*

+ From a high school math teacher, late 20's—

*“So what about good Friday? How can a death of a perfect human being be so good? Isn't that an oxymoron, Good Death? And not only his death, but my death too. A complete death, to the bone, and here is the thing, I'm the one that killed him. I'm the one that killed myself. I tried so hard to get it right, I tried so hard to depend on grace, I tried so hard—I, I, I—I killed him because of my dependence on me. So then, what is so Good about that Friday? Well, it's good because we know the end of the story. It's good because today he is risen. Today he says, “For you, you who killed me, here, have it all, take my righteousness, take my purity, take all that is mine, I did it for you, leave everything that is yours, I'll trade you.” Today we make the trade, no more trying, no more needing to get it right, no more me, only him. And with that, live. Live today in the resurrection. Live tomorrow, the next day, and the day after knowing that regardless of the mistakes and how numerous they may be, know that he whispers in your ear, “For you.” Go now and love each other, and keep in mind that Jesus Christ is risen from the dead (your death), he is our risen Lord, he is Joy for all ages.”*

+ From a firefighter and law student, early 30's—

*“Sometimes I can't help but think about people that we only see on Christmas and Easter. It reminds me of a bar review strategies book I read that asked what was preventing me from spending the three months before the exam being the kind of*

*student I wished I'd been during three years of law school. So I wonder if some want to get some solid time in when it counts or something—and I wish they knew that Christmas and Easter are really celebrated every week at my church and other churches (in the same way that I'm learning to celebrate it every day)."[Translation: "Pay attention to these folks, preachers. Tempt them. Hook them. Give the Holy Spirit a chance to reel them in!" –JB]*

+ From a supervisor of teams that secure foreclosed properties against damage and decay, mid-30's—

*"[Tell us that] God came through! He did exactly what He set out to do."The feeling of being disappointed or 'let down' is so familiar to so many in life. Let down by the stories we see in the news. Let down by people we interact with or encounter. Disappointed by the general hand dealt in life. Isn't this exactly where a cynic is born?*

*"Easter is where God Almighty delivers on his promise and gives us every reason to put that skepticism away and trust him. Isaiah writes in my favorite Old Testament reading, chapter 53, "bruised for our transgressions and crushed for our iniquities... On him the chastisement that made us whole". That was the sacrifice—Him for me. Easter morning seals the deal! God smiling down with a smug 'I told you so!' face.*

*"There was pain and struggle for hundreds of years in between when the promises were made and when they were realized. Same goes for me and my life. Years of ups and downs. In the end the point remains—God came through! Good to His word. He raised Jesus from the dead. Time to be confident that he will do it again...with me, with you and with all who have even the slightest inclination to trust it be true!"*

+ From a church musician and Associate in Ministry, mid-60's—

*“See ‘A Lamb goes uncomplaining forth,’ LBW 105, st 4. We know the end of our story which is Christ’s story. I am now free of all that binds me—death, my possessions. I am free to love and care for my neighbor. Satan cannot harm me, nor can the world.”*

+ From a bank employee, musician, and self-taught lay theologian (e.g., absorber of Luther’s Bondage of the Will), late 30's—

*“Without Easter (and Ascension), what happened from Christmas through Good Friday is just ‘news’. What happens from Easter through Ascension is what reveals it to be ‘Good News.’ Until Easter, all we really have is a sensational story, just like we hear on our tired out news programs every day. We have hero-worship, spectacle, betrayal, brutality, injustice, opinion, all of it ultimately useless to us without Easter and Ascension. Secondly, Easter is a delicious example of the future determining the past, just like God’s work always does. Where humans work, the past determines the future—we sow what we reap; God works in the opposite direction—‘reaping where he does not sow.’”*

+ From a Lutheran elementary school teacher, Associate in Ministry, late 50's, —

*“Press the question: ‘Who are YOU looking for?’ or ‘Who ARE you looking for?’ Asking us as Christians to put ourselves in the shoes (sandals?) of the women who came to the tomb.”*

+ From a consecrated deaconess (Lutheran Deaconess Association) and long time member of a synod staff, mid-60's—

*“[Tell us—]*

- *Why this abhorrent reality (the crucifixion of Jesus) is good news.*
- *Why it makes a difference.*
- *What the empty tomb means.*
- *Are terror and amazement the right responses from me? Then what?"*

+ From a missionary's daughter, long married to a pastor's son, late 50's-

*What I intently listen for in an Easter sermon is three connections—Good Friday, Easter, and my life. I know that sounds self-centered, and I'm rather ashamed of that, but in the end, I really want to hear again (because I'm such a disbeliever) WHY (and wherefore?) what happened to Jesus ends up being good for ME and my world. HOW does it give me hope in the face of my degenerating body and assured death, in the face of my abject inadequacies and miserable shortcomings, in the face of the suffering, selfish world in which I live? I want to rejoice and be happy and sing, but PLEASE, tell me again, WHY? I doubt so much.*

+ From a project manager, currently overseeing a laborious upgrade of his company's management software, early 30's –

*"I read this quote from a Luther sermon while thinking about your question: 'If the conscience is to be comforted, it can only be by the preaching of Christ's death and resurrection—this alone comforts. In contrast, all other preaching of law, good works, holy living, whether commanded by God or men, is incapable of comforting a person in times of need and death; instead it leaves him uncertain and in despair, frightened and tormented. If we consider God without Christ, we find no comfort but only righteous wrath and displeasure. But*

*whoever preaches Christ proclaims and brings true comfort, so that it will be impossible for hearts not to be joyous and of good cheer.'*"

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II. On Easter Preaching, by some Veteran Preachers  
+ From Bishop Elizabeth Eaton, Northeastern Ohio Synod-

*"Always preach one point, never fewer.*

- *Mention Jesus. (You'd be surprised how many sermons from Lutheran pastors I have heard that do not mention Jesus. Not even once.*
- *If you don't preach the cross and resurrection you haven't preached the gospel.*
- *And this from my homiletics professor, Krister Stendahl, 'Don't start with a joke; it's all downhill after that.'*"

+ From Pr. David Kukelhan, Triune Lutheran, Broadview Heights, Ohio, aficionado and master of the bon mot-

*"Easter is for joy. A little humor never hurts."*

+ From Pr. Marcus Felde, Bethlehem Lutheran, Indianapolis-

*"Read 2 Corinthians 4:1-15 before proceeding. Then think 'Self: Clay Pot; Gospel: Treasure.' We 'do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord; and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus' sake.' Imbibe 4:13: 'We also believe, and so we speak, because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus, and will bring us with you into his presence.' Is that Easter preaching advice or what?"*

+ From Pr. Ruth Hanusa, hospice chaplain, Reno, Nevada-



*“Keep it pruned. The folks who hear you preach all of the time have the story down pat; those who don’t, don’t need your entire Christology trotted out as catch-up, or to make them feel guilty. Give them all something—lean and clean—to catch their breath over. Mark 16 is especially good for this; it’s edgy.”*

+ From Pr. Steve Albertin, Christ, Zionsville, Indiana-

*“Words from the late Jerry Pelikan—I think spoken shortly before his death—summarize for me the decisiveness of preaching the resurrection: ‘If Christ is not raised, nothing else matters. Nothing else matters, if Christ is not raised.’”The annual celebration of Easter and the unique audience it provides gives preachers an unusual opportunity to lay it all out on the line in a decisive, clear and definitive manner. This is the day to boil it down to the essentials. This is the day to make sure that “the good news...is good news. Because if the good news is not good news, then it is not THE good news.” Clearly using Christ WILL bring COMFORT (and good news) to searching souls. On this day—perhaps more than any other day of the church—folks come looking to hear the genuine good news of Christ risen and the difference that makes for life not only in eternity but NOW!”*

+ From Burce, your editor, Messiah Lutheran, Fairview Park, Ohio-

*“Preach to THEM, the folks in front of you, right now, this morning. You’re charged in this moment with real-deal, real time stuff, God’s urgent, vital Word to THESE people through YOUR mouth. So spit it out already! ‘Christ-for-you (yes, YOU) is risen! Don’t be afraid!’”*

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# Lenten Disciplines

In today's Thursday Theology, Jerry Burce muses on recent trends in Lutheran approaches to Lent, contrasting them with old approaches to the season.

Peace and Joy,  
Carol Braun, for the editorial team

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Colleagues:

I wrote last week that I was going to pass along some thoughts about the habit, now current among the Lutherans I know, of encouraging the classic Lenten disciplines as a thing for earnest, thoughtful Christians to pay attention to and practice.

To get started I typed "fasting prayer almsgiving Lutheran" in my browser's Google bar. Here's a puny sample of the results I got, 100,000+ of them. Exhibit 1 was the first entry on the first page. Exhibits 2 and 3 came from slightly deeper in. I plucked all three from up-to-date websites of Lutheran congregations in the U.S. The words in italics are mine, not theirs.

1.

Today we start the season of Lent, a time of emphasis on spiritual practices. The Great Commandment can be an excellent guide to the spiritual practices of Lent: "You shall love the Lord your God with your heart, mind, and soul and your neighbor as yourself."

We are to love God. Prayer helps define our relationship to God.

We are to love our neighbor. The giving of alms and other support to the poor shows our love for our neighbor.

We are to love ourselves. Fasting is an excellent discipline to help us get more in touch with ourselves.

During this Lenten season, I encourage you to pay attention to your spiritual disciplines.

To which one aches to add: "Do it, and you will live."

2.

Beneath a tagline that reads "Confessional Doctrine, Traditional Liturgy"

During the forty days of Lent, God's baptized people cleanse their hearts through the discipline of Lent: repentance, prayer, fasting, and almsgiving.

3.

After opening remarks about the writer's training regimen for long distance running competitions—

February 22, 2012 marks the beginning of another season of "disciplined training." That day is Ash Wednesday and it is the first day of the Lenten journey which will cover 40 days and end on Easter morning, April 8. It's a time where we are to focus on strengthening our prayer, fasting, and almsgiving muscles.

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I don't recall hearing about the classic Lenten disciplines when I was a Lutheran lad. My missionary parents didn't talk about them. Nor did the LCMS-trained teachers at my elementary school. Nor did the Australian Lutheran pastors who shaped the piety of

the high school I attended in Adelaide.

To be sure, we prayed. Every day, both at home and at school. We remembered the poor, though never well enough, our instruction in giving being focused chiefly on chipping in some coins when the collection plate passed by. Fasting was a Catholic thing. If a Lutheran boy thought about it all, it was only for the sake of feeling smug that we, the better Christians, were at perfect liberty to chow down on the meat pies and sausage rolls that were standard fare in the high school tuck shop, also on Fridays. This is not to say that we Lutheran boys and girls were deprived of calls to mortify the flesh. Fact is, these came at us constantly, and not only during Lent. "What does such baptizing with water signify? Answer: ...that the Old Adam in us should...daily...be drowned and die, and...a new creature daily come forth and arise," etc. Or in Jesus' terms, "Let anyone who would come after me deny him/herself, take up his/her cross, and follow me." This was year-long fare. To this day I'm able to sing "When I survey the wondrous cross" by heart, all four stanzas of it. This can only be because it was a staple of high school chapel services regardless of the season. "My richest gain I count but loss." "Love so amazing, so divine / demands my soul, my life, my all." In other words, give it up for Jesus. Every day. In every way. No time off for good behavior, as Old Adam liked to grumble whenever he surfaced for another gulp of air.

So what was Lent for, back then? The kid's answer was "More church (sigh)." The adults who ran things would have spoken about the imperative of paying honor and heed to the person and the act at the heart of reality as Christians confess it to be. Whereas at other times of the year we attended to all manner of things that fall under the umbrella of "the Christian faith," in Lent we zeroed in on Christ and him crucified. As I feebly remember, that was the steady, year-after-year content of the

special Wednesday Lenten services that were de rigueur in every Lutheran church I knew of. We studied the Passion. We heard of Jesus' wounds. We got the perspective of the several players in the drama. We heard tell, over and over, of the love of God beyond all understanding, distilled to its most concentrated form in the Son of God bleeding out his life for the salvation of the world.

What I don't recollect is being told to do something. The other day I asked a Milwaukee-born friend of similar age and background—straight LCMS in his case—if he remembered this. No, he said. And then with a laugh, "I was a kid. Could be I just wasn't paying attention." So I called a retired colleague, a graduate of Hamma Seminary, and asked what Lent was like in his early years as a pastor of the former Lutheran Church in America. The account he gave made me wonder why our forebears in the LCA and LCMS disliked each other so. In Lent, at least, they did the same thing. They preached the Passion. They urged repentance. They did their level best to fasten eyes and hearts on Jesus. What accounts for this sameness? I'm guessing a shared and solid commitment to the original Wittenberg principle of Christian discipleship that Bob Kolb laid out for us so deftly three weeks ago. "If you [trust] in the Lord above all else that he [has] made, you [will] do what the logic of faith makes inevitable." Or as we Crossings types might spin it, "To fix behavior, attend to the heart. To cure the heart, preach Christ." Again I'm guessing that this or something very like it drove those Lutheran Lents of yesteryear, however well or poorly they played out. In any case, thus that dreaded dose, for kids, of extra church.

Then something changed. Or so it feels.

I'd love to see Bob Kolb or some of his academic admirers bring the same scrutiny to U.S. Lutheran habits and pieties of the

past 50 years that Bob has been applying to the 18th-century pieties of German Lutherans. Instead of postils and prayerbooks, they'd browse church bulletins and newsletters. They'd pore through the catalogues of CPH and Augsburg Fortress, at least for the years (were there any?) when Lutheran layfolk bothered to shop there instead of dashing down to the local Christian bookstore for the newest best-seller by the latest hot-spit Arminian evangelical. These days, of course, those layfolk do their dashing to amazon.com. How one might study that I haven't a clue. Nor can I guess how one would track the shifting, evolving content on current-century websites of congregations and districts, of synods and churchwide organizations. I'm ever so glad I'm not the historian who would need to figure such things out.

But I do hope somebody does. Among so much else, I'd like to understand a lot better than I do how we managed to arrive at today's not-so-Lutheran Lent, the one that makes the nose of a confessional thinker start twitching the way a dog's does when it smells a rat.

Fasting. Prayer. Almsgiving. Essential Christian habits, yes. About that there's no Lutheran argument. Melanchthon, writing in the Apology, cheerfully agrees with his Roman opponents that all three are commanded by God (Ap XII.139). Who with even a moderate grasp of all that's in the Bible would think to dispute that, at least where prayer and care for the poor are concerned? Fasting, to be sure, is a more complicated issue. In the synoptics Jesus gets taken to task because his disciples don't fast (Mk. 2:18ff, with parallels). The Gospel of John makes no mention at all of the practice. There are three references in Acts 13 and 14 to Christians fasting as they pray. After that the word vanishes from the New Testament, not a peep in Paul, nor even in James. If Melanchthon is willing nonetheless to assert its importance, that's because he thinks of fasting in a

broad sense, not merely as a refusal of food but as anything and everything that Christians do by way of so saying no to their consumptive inclinations. The “mortification” and “discipline” of the flesh, he calls it; and when he speaks of it as a “necessary kind of exercise” he points to Jesus’ injunction to “Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation” (Lk. 21:34) and to Paul’s readiness to “pummel my body [soma, not sarx] and subdue it” (1 Cor. 9:27). What’s more, lest anyone in Wittenberg should think that giving sausages up for Lent will fill the bill here, he speaks of “true fasting” which “must be constant, because God constantly commands it”; and what God commands is “diligence” against “indulging the flesh and catering to its desires.” (For the above see Ap XII.139, XIV.45-47.)

Again the question for the historians: how did we get from fasting as diligence against indulging the flesh to fasting as self-love, “an excellent discipline to help us get more in touch with ourselves” (Exhibit 1 above)? That’s the tale I’d love to hear. Until it gets told by someone competent to tell, I’m obliged to shelve my own suspicions in the matter. That’s all they are, suspicions, by no means ready for prime time. To spit them out would be an indulgence of my own flesh and a sin against the eighth commandment, the one that in Luther’s account enjoins us to speak well of our neighbors and explain their actions in the kindest way. That would surely include whatever actions, large or small, have contributed in recent decades to the steady corruption of a proper Lutheran Lent.

And a corruption it is, this new Lutheran Lent with its shift of focus from the cross of Christ to the pushing of the disciplines. Doubtless that shift was well intended. Someone saw reasons for it, found them compelling, and got lots of other influential folks to sign on to the project. It would hardly be the first time that good intentions have gone awry. But gone

awry they have. I underscore this for the sake of any other well-intentioned Lutheran neighbors who continue today to support the shift. In a word, it doesn't work. By focusing attention on desired outcomes it disrupts the very process that produces good outcomes. It downgrades Christ. It yields rotten fruit, or at least it threatens to.

One sees the problem in all three of the opening exhibits that I plucked from those congregational websites. I've already held my nose at the first. To imagine that I need to critique it further would insult your Christian intelligence. Still, indulge me. One more shot at the fish-filled barrel: Q. "As you all work away at your 'spiritual practices,' who gets the love? Jesus?" A. "Jesus? Who's that?" (OK, I'm done. Here's the rifle. Pop away.)

Christ is also missing from Exhibits 2 and 3 unless you're willing in E2 to find him tucked deeply away in the reference to "God's baptized people." E2 adds "repentance" to the list of disciplines, preliminary to the other three. That would be a step in the right direction were we given a clue as to what the repenting was about. We're told that all four in combination are the means through which the baptized "cleanse their hearts." A proper preface for Lent (Lutheran Book of Worship) employs precisely that language. That hardly excuses it. Did someone miss the point of Ash Wednesday's psalm that heart-cleansing is a job only God can do (Ps. 51:7, 10)?

For its part, E3 speaks of "strengthening our prayer, fasting, and almsgiving muscles" but gives no reason for doing that. Why then "focus" on it? Again, Christ gets no mention, but then neither does God unless, in another excess of charity, we're willing to find him present by implication as the one we pray to. E3 also trots out another popular feature of the new Lent, by which we find ourselves on a "journey" that starts on Ash Wednesday and "ends on Easter morning." So much for the



constancy of God's commands that Melanchthon underscored. Come Easter afternoon we all get to loaf, and what? Wait till next year to pray again or say another "no" to the raging old Adam? OK, I'm being unfair. But then if the behaviors touted for Lent are meant for everyday use, why lift them up as special to Lent? And why these behaviors in particular? Why not hard work? Devoted parenting? Consistent truth-telling? Why not manifestations of the "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control" that people "guided by the Spirit" are free to exhibit in ways beyond counting (Gal. 5:22-23, 25)? Or why superficial fasting and not the deeper crucifying of the flesh that Paul speaks about in the same passage (Gal. 5:24)? Frankly, the latter sounds far more useful to the Christian person herself, and of much greater benefit to the people who have to live with her.

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Time now to get serious.

The real problem with today's Lent is far graver than the superficial stuff I've sketched so far. It's as if the greatest gift the Spirit gave the Church through the Wittenberg reformers has been shoved in a corner by their own careless children, and there it sits collecting dust. A few, one fears, have tossed it in the trash. So it strikes me, at any rate.

Here I sing to the choir: Luther and company grasped as few others have that life with God is a matter not of behavior but of trust. If you trust well, you'll behave well. If you trust poorly the behavior that arises from that, however pretty it appears, will be a stink in the nostrils of God Almighty. Chances are, of course, that it will quickly spread unpleasantness in the neighborhood as well.

This, by the way, is the thrust of the Gospel we hear on Ash Wednesday. See the bits in Matthew 6 about the hypocrites who

flaunt their almsgiving, praying, and fasting. (Parenthetically: I'll bet Jesus mentions these activities and not others simply because they're the three the hypocrites most like to flaunt. The point is not that followers of his should grant them preferential rank among all other possible behaviors.)

Now it happens that Matthew 6 is an all but perfect text to run through the Crossings sieve, that scheme devised by a couple of recent teachers, Bob Bertram and Ed Schroeder, to help keep the Wittenberg gift dusted off and sparkling in the middle of the room where it belongs.

So here's how the passage looks in a Crossings 6-step outline: 1 (Surface behavioral problem): Folks are stinking up the joint as they flaunt their piety. 2 (Underlying trust problem): They love the oohs and aahs they get. They believe it amounts to something. 3 (Fundamental God problem): They've gotten their reward. No oohs and aahs from God for them. Quite the opposite. 4 (Fundamental Christ solution): Jesus sweetens the whole wide world through the hidden piety of dying for the hypocrites and earning God's Easter ooh and aah for their sake, and ours too. 5 (Underlying trust solution): We start believing that the ooh and aah bestowed by God on Jesus is the only one we'll ever need. 6 (Surface behavior solution): We don't flaunt our piety, we simply do it. We quietly honor our Father with conduct that sweetens the neighborhood. "Ooh and aah," say some of the neighbors as they think for once to thank God.

True fasting, true prayer, true care for the poor—true whatever, of the kind that deposits the glories of ooh and aah at the feet of the only One who deserves them: that's what Christ is aiming for ("Let your light so shine," etc., Matt. 5:16). And wouldn't you know, that's exactly what he gets out of us when we trust him. But first he has to kill that hankering within for oohs and aahs of our own, the suspicion being that we somehow need them.

It's this ever-present hankering that makes it impossible to elicit what God is looking for from folks by telling them what to do. You get it instead, counter-intuitively, by telling them over and over what Christ has done for them.

That's not, I think, what our new Lent is doing for the saints.

+ + +

Our old Lent did it, though.

Old Lent started with a real Ash Wednesday, not one that diddled around with talk of disciplines and Lenten journeys but focused squarely on dealing the death blow to the old creature's pretensions. Once a year we were forced to listen. "Dust you are. To dust you shall return." It will happen not by dint of accident or the mere nature of things, but because God says it must. He's the one who stands against you, implacably, insurmountably. Don't think you'll buy him off with your "good" behavior. Ain't gonna happen.

Yet wonder of wonders, this God-against-you is also the God who sends his Son to find you in the ash heap, to forgive your sins, to brand you with his cross, and to fill your newly created lungs with the breath, life, and power called Holy Spirit. Don't be afraid. Away you go not just to die—that you'll do—but also to live. You've got Christ's promise on this.

So that was Ash Wednesday. Then to reinforce its central point folks heard of Christ their whole Lent long. And from that process, repeated again and again, emerged the old Lutheran codgers that lots of us have known and treasured, and still do. They can be prickly, difficult, dense; here and there prideful; not always easy to get along with. But oh my goodness, how generous they can be. How devoted to prayer and daily devotion. How fiercely committed to starving the beast called "self," or trying to, at least. And in myriad other ways they bless the

world God sends them into day after day.

Those codgers are the living proof, it seems to me, of the Wittenberg point. Preach Law to kill. Preach Gospel to resurrect. Preach Christ, Christ, Christ, and watch how good things start to flow from trusting hearts.

I think we ought to start a movement to retrieve the Lent that was. Our kids won't like it too much. Gone will be their chance to brag about giving up chocolates, and in its place will come the agony of still more church. So be it. It's never too soon to start mortifying the flesh with the genuine mortification that comes from the hand and mouth of God and lands us in the lap of Christ our Lord.

It's from that lap alone that tomorrow's saintly codgers will finally spring.

Jerome Burce  
Lakewood, Ohio  
March 29, 2012

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*The Divorce of Sex and Marriage: Sain Sex*, a new book by Robert Bertram, is now available for a \$10 donation to Crossings. Please include \$3 for shipping and handling, and send your request to [clessmann@charter.net](mailto:clessmann@charter.net).

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# The “Heart Disease” of Self-Referential Faith

Colleagues,

I was planning to write today’s offering, but time ran out. Look for it next week, when I’m going to raise a question or two about whether pastors and churches are well-advised to tout the classic disciplines of fasting, prayer, and almsgiving as the thing for folks to concentrate on during Lent. I think not, at least not in the way I hear them being touted these days. I also think that Robert Kolb laid out a superb case over the past two Thursdays for being chary of them. But more on that, as I say, next week.

For now we send you something better, a reflection by an ELCA bishop on the sort of thing that does demand our attention in Lent, indeed, the very thing that the ongoing discipline of God’s Law and God’s Gospel seeks to address. The author is Bishop Martin Wells of the Eastern Washington-Idaho Synod. Bishop Wells had been asked to present a paper at January’s Crossings Conference on “The Church Executive as Disciple.” For reasons he explains himself, he wound up inviting four other ELCA bishops to share the assignment with him. Together they put together one of the most compelling hours of the entire event. We’ll pass along some other pieces of that in coming weeks or months. For now, start with Bishop Wells. Those who heard him in person couldn’t help but thank God that he’s a leading pastor of the Church. We suspect you’ll do the same.

Peace and Joy,

Jerry Burce, for the editors

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## **Address to the 4th Annual Crossings Conference, January 22-25, 2012**

### **Conference Theme: “The Gospel-Given Life: Discipleship Revisited”**

#### **“The Heart-Disease of Self-Referential Faith”**

I’m very grateful to Dr. Kuhl for this invitation and still more grateful for the committee’s flexibility in shifting from a presentation by one bishop to this panel format. I’m deeply grateful to my partner bishops for stepping into the breach on behalf of the conference.

This change was occasioned by the loss of preparation time last fall as a brother came to live with us—and now it looks like it will be for the whole winter—seeking treatment for a papillary squamous-cell carcinoma, a nasty mouth cancer. We have become my brother’s keeper not out of big hearts, but because he had no place else to go and welcoming him was minimally required under the commandment to honor father and mother. Besides, he’s a wonderful fellow and he and I have learned to live with the ways we drive one another nuts! The same can’t be assumed for a spouse who is asked to open the intimate space of home, particularly when she does her work from home. Thank you to Susan Briehl, my wife.

Please continue to pray and work for those who under the present healthcare system must show up at culture’s door and hope to be let in and be cared for. I see how we pay for it now; how much better if we could give all citizens the chance to seek this care with dignity rather than beg for it. Scott is in the last weeks of radiation and chemo and we are hopeful for a full recovery.

+ + +

I'm so grateful for the excuse to re-read Discipleship by Dietrich Bonhoeffer and reflect on his words in our present cultural moment. It is a time of serious and deep transition for much of the human family and the aspect of this transition that is most interesting to me is the call to enter the globalized context and in some way move beyond formerly powerful tribal, and religious, and national loyalties into something like a world community.

But shedding old loyalties isn't easy, even if only for the purpose of making room for others. I've experienced this in making room for a brother, but others are experiencing it as a deep threat, made clear by the nativist voices that we hear calling for new protections around that which is supposedly "ours" in this country.

"Ours," the air we breathe? "Ours," the clean water we need for the basics of life?

Of all the aspects of the work, the most challenging during my twelve years as bishop has been to face what I've come to call such "entitlement thinking." Such thinking is like the quiet passing of gas in a closed car. It fouls the Spirit and leaves everyone gasping for fresh air and room to breathe. It is the opposite of a deep sense of gratitude, living from gift, the expansive, fresh sense that life means us well, and instead of binding and blinding us, calls us to a sense of "enough," and for disciples of Jesus, more than enough, pure gift, pure grace, gratitude.

There isn't time enough to talk about the ways in which such entitlement thinking is choking our church, but I think it is, and my fear is that it will finally demand all the air and smother us, cramping us down into cells of white-hot resentment that look a lot like the congregationalist model of church and

put us on an inevitable way to the “Sheilaism” anticipated by sociologist Robert Bellah. It reminds me of the classic joke about the shipwreck survivor, who after years alone on an island is finally rescued. He’s eager to show his rescuers the world he’s built for himself, and passing along, points out a small church and then later a second church building. Asked why he needed a second church the man replied, “Oh I had a fight in the first place and left!” And so it goes.

Against this model of culture and church I believe God intends to call us from gratitude, that expansive sense of release, unbinding, and joy that comes, ultimately, from the gift of trust, the most ancient way we connect with God.

The well I draw from as a disciple and as a church leader is Luther’s description, in the introduction to the First Commandment in the Large Catechism, that—and here I paraphrase—“Our god is that which we ultimately trust, the place to which our hearts incline, cling, and entrust themselves.” As a believer and as a church leader, the first matter of concern—and discipleship—is a matter of the heart.

So, to reflect on discipleship as a church executive, my attention turned to my own “habits of heart” and brother Bonhoeffer’s provocations on Matthew 6, particularly section 167 entitled “The Simplicity of Carefree Life.” It’s here that Bonhoeffer turns to Luther and the first commandment as well.

Luther and Bonhoeffer spend a good deal of time addressing the false god of mammon and, like you, I don’t spend any time worrying about that except as I obsess about the 10% of my salary I gave up two years ago, a gift I’m pretty sure nobody remembers! No, the line that caught my attention was this line from Luther: [P. 386ff, Kolb/Wengert, para 10]: “So, too, those who boast of great learning, wisdom, power, prestige, family,



and honor and who trust in them have a god also, but not the one, true God.”

Great learning, wisdom, power (or ambition), honor (or reputation)—and I think we could add today, “conscience”: these are the false gods that draw my eye as a bishop.

I say this to those of you who wonder if you should be called to the office of bishop: It’s true what they say: if you pursue the office out of ambition then you will always wonder if it is God’s call. When you reach for authenticity and the deep authority of the gospel all you’ll remember is that it was always about you. A New Yorker cartoon from 2008 has the patron leaning over the bar whispering to the bartender: “I’m nothing, and yet I’m all I can think about.”

And if you seek wisdom without understanding where it comes from—unusually terrible loss and the way of the cross—and yearn to be known as one who is wise, you will always know that such wisdom is a false god to which you cannot give your heart because you avoid suffering.

To rely on the god of great learning is to end up, as I have, with an office full of books that mock me because I haven’t read them.

Finally, my favorite false god is worry. Here is Bonhoeffer: “We want our worrying to make us worry-free.” Hmm.

Against these challenges I’m here with you today to learn more about the heart and how it trusts, how it follows after the source of trust. I’m here because I think I have seen in these famous lines from Pastor Bonhoeffer what the heart looks like when it clings to Life Itself:

*“Who am I? They mock me, these lonely questions of mine.*

*Whoever I am, Thou knowest O God, I am thine!"*

The clinging heart, fresh and wet in the embrace of God, lives in ultimate gratitude.

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## **Discipleship in the Lutheran Tradition, Continued**

Colleagues,

Herewith the second installment of Robert Kolb's exploration of Lutheran thought and practice in matters pertaining to the development of the conscientious Christian. We broke off the tale last week in the latter part of the 16th century. Today Bob ushers us through the 17th century and into the 18th, introducing us along the way to some once famous pastors and teachers whose acquaintance is still well worth making. Then he'll jump us forward to the middle part of the 20th century and conclude with some thoughts about the challenges facing Lutherans today as they seek from the strength of their tradition to foster disciples whose eyes, hearts, and lives are

fixed on Christ where they belong. Not the least of these challenges is the blessed peculiarity of a tradition shaped by the distinction between Law and Gospel. As Bob will put it at the end, “discipleship just looks different in a Lutheran context.” May the aim of grasping why and how encourage your close and careful reading.

Peace and Joy,  
Jerry Burce, for the editors

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## The History of Discipleship in the Lutheran Tradition, Part 2

The sixteenth-century disciples of Luther and Melanchthon continued to emphasize that the Christian life is a life of repentance, in the midst of an eschatological battle with Satan and all his minions, they also believed. About mid-century a new literary genre arose and flourished for a generation in the Wittenberg circle – and was peculiar to it – as a means of calling for repentance and for instructing in the new obedience which flows from faith: the “devil book,” the *“Teufelsbuch.”* The devil played a relatively small role in this genre, but he provided the occasion for focusing on a variety of sins that plagued the baptized of the later sixteenth century. While placing full responsibility for violating God’s law on sinners, these works also highlighted the devil’s wiles and the formidable conflict, not with flesh and blood, but with principalities and powers, that confronts the baptized. Several of these works addressed problems of faith: Andreas Fabricius’ *Holy, Clever, and Learned Devil, opposing the First Commandment of God, opposing Faith, and opposing Christ* (1567), Simon Musaeus’s *Melancholy Devil*, Andreas Lange’s *The Worry Devil, or Against the Pagan Worry over the Belly or Bodily Sustenance* (1573). [1] Others addressed the actual sins of peasants, artisans, merchants, and nobles, with implications for

personal behavior and social deviation. Andreas Musculus's *Trousers Devil* excoriated the rich young men, burgher and noble, of Frankfurt an der Oder for their sexually explicit mode of dress and called them to repentance with fierce threats of God's judgment. The hunting practices of the nobility and the consequent losses suffered by peasants for the sake of the hunt brought Cyriakus Spangenberg's expression of God's wrath down upon his superiors. [2] The Ratzeburger home may not have been typical in German, Nordic, Baltic, and Slavic Lutheranism in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but the large number of devotional books in one form or another indicates an increasing use of such materials for personal and family edification. [3] Sermon books served the purpose—and not only German homiletical collections but also the first work published in Latvian, the postil of Georg Mancelius (1654), aimed at such a cultivation of trust in the Savior and the practice of a life which reflected his love. [4] Similarly Bernhard Liess's study of the published sermons of Johann Heermann, pastor and hymn-writer, focuses on Christ's person and work, on the use of the means of grace in personal devotion as well as congregational life, and on personal repentance. [5]

Mancelius wrote for use by preaching pastors and the devotion-leading heads of households, but others wrote specifically for individual or family meditation. Never completely free from the mystical side of the monastic piety which had sustained Luther in part on his way to his evangelical maturation, Lutheran tradition contains some formative thinkers who returned to certain elements of that way of coping with reality in the late sixteenth and seventh centuries. One example of this literature is found in the writings of a Silesian pastor, Valerius Herberger (1562-1627), who suffered persecution from Counter-Reformation forces in Fraustadt, where Lutherans were thrown out of their church but did get to build a chapel. He promoted a

strong personal trust in Jesus with meditations on Bible texts, which found symbols of aspects of the person and work of Christ at every turn but which did little to cultivate new obedience in daily interaction with other human beings. His works treated the passion stories, the Psalms, the pericopes, and Genesis, among others. They reflect a change of mood from the mid-sixteenth century, a more “spiritual” kind of engagement and exchange with God.

Luther’s style of piety requires exertion, for loving the neighbor in the boring grind of the every day is hard work and often not at all exciting. Luther preached the joys which await us in heaven but focused largely on surviving Satan’s assaults and taking care of family and neighbors on a day-to-day basis. Perhaps because other forms of religiosity seem more religious, or perhaps because life in the seventeenth century was evermore grueling and arduous, due particularly to the war, Lutheran piety took a turn toward the other-worldly in a more intense way than we notice in its first two generations. That is seen both in the relatively little attention paid to service in vocation in the daily course of life as well as a more emotional and also other-worldly expression of devotion to Jesus.

Herberger’s reflections on the verses of Genesis sought to exposit “the mysteries of Christ” found there, training readers to think upon the Savior in complete dependence on the Holy Spirit, and with a focus on his suffering and death. He began: “Dearest Reader! Since ‘no one can call Jesus “Lord” except in the Holy Spirit’, and no one can say, write, or think anything beneficial, comforting, or noteworthy about Jesus without God’s Spirit, and since the Holy Spirit’s particular work of grace is to reveal Jesus Christ to our heart and to make Him known: therefore may you first begin by appealing to God the Father in the name of our sweet Lord and Savior Jesus Christ for the light and grace of the Holy Spirit, that you may be able to read this

beneficial, comforting work profitably, piously, and to your betterment.” [6] The attitude of total reliance upon Christ led Herberger to pray with his readers, “If I am wrapt in sickness and the anguish of death, if language escapes me and my lips cannot speak, nevertheless, I will groan in my heart, O Lord Jesus, essential Word of the heavenly Father! ... Prove now that You are my Spokesman, my Advocate, and my Witness.” [7] The Wittenberg heritage combined with incipient Baroque style to shape the readers’ thinking through the use of intricate literary devices, including metaphors or allegories elaborating on words and phrases of the biblical text, sometimes with more, sometimes less connection to the text itself. Mention of the mustard seed which served as a red dye recalled the blood of Jesus; the use of mustard seeds smoked over coals to ward against snakes reminds readers that Jesus was placed as an offering on the coals of the Father’s wrath to repel Satan’s forces. [8] The “fish and birds” of Genesis 1:21 produce the comparison of Jesus with seven birds; the honeybee provides ten points of comparison with Jesus, the “broody hen” eight. [9] The shedding of Abel’s blood opened a discussion of the vicarious atonement in twelve points of comparison. [10] Not careful exegesis nor the intent of the author but rather the edification of the pious of his own time commanded Herberger’s *modus operandi* as he moved from the text to Christ’s work in the first century and its significance in the seventeenth. Herberger’s aids for meditation cultivated a sense of repentance in readers but provided little direct encouragement for serving the neighbor and fulfilling one’s callings in home, occupation, society, or, for that matter, the congregation. The charge that Lutheran Orthodoxy perpetrated an individualization and spiritualization of the faith seems justified in Herberger’s work.

Out of this mood of devotional writing grew the concept of an

“unio mystica” that united Christ and the believer, propagated, among other sources, by the posthumously edited writings of the Wittenberg-educated Saxon pastor Valentin Weigel (1533-1588). In part out of independent roots, in part to counter the mystical, neo-platonic approach found in the Weigel bequest, forms of piety developed within the “Orthodox” teaching at the university that developed significantly different emphases than Luther had accented while trying to remain within the structure of Christian faith and life which Luther had constructed. [11] The publication of Weigel’s ideas attracted the immediate criticism of Wittenberg professor Nikolaus Hunnius of Wittenberg. His colleague Friedrich Balduin also rejected Weigelianism but argued that a certain union between God and his human creatures takes place through the Word in which God is present and which establishes trust in Christ, who through faith dwells in believers’ hearts. This indwelling is not substantial, however, he insisted. Balduin’s ideas formed the basis of the thinking of one of the most popular of Lutheran writers, who cultivated the life of following Christ through the seventeenth century and into the twentieth, Johann Arndt. Arndt’s opposition to the introduction of Calvinism had earned him exile from Anhalt, and as superintendent of the Lutheran church of Braunschweig-Lüneburg he authored some of the most widely read devotional materials in subsequent Lutheran history. Some scholars have argued that Arndt fully abandoned reliance on the means of grace for an inward spirituality that posited a substantial union between believer and God. Eric Lund has recently shown that in his pericopal sermons, published and widely distributed in his own day, Arndt indeed was proclaiming to his hearers a piety rooted in the external word of promise that forgives sins and moves God’s children to lives of devotion and communion with God through the Word as well as service within the callings of daily life to the neighbor. [12] His *True Christianity and Little Garden of Paradise* did seek to cultivate a practical piety but

did so by emphasizing the spiritual communion and union of the follower of Christ with the Lord in mystical expressions.

Other parish pastors in Arndt's generation and the next found the mystical union a helpful description of the relationship between God and his chosen children but stressed that this union does not result in any substantial "divinization" of the human being. Philipp Nicolai and Statius Buscher (d. 1641), superintendent in Lübeck, both Orthodox in their teaching, insisted that the relationship of bride and bridegroom, a union which preserves and enhances the distinct identities of the two, bound believers to their Lord in working for common goals, and this viewpoint persisted over the century. The Orthodox dogmatician and parish pastor David Hollaz (1648-1713) distinguished the formal or relational union of faith with its personal object, God, from the mystical or sanctifying unity of God and believer: faith justifies and results in indwelling of the (totally distinct) Creator; God is present in the believer's repentance and justifying faith and that presence produces the life of devotion and service that marks the children of God.

In differing forms of expression this mood of devotional writing is found in the two most popular authors of the genre: the parish pastor and ecclesiastical official Johann Arndt (1555-1621), whose *Four/Six Books on True Christianity and Little Garden of Paradise* attracted criticism in his own day as spiritualistic and continue to be read in that manner today, and Johann Gerhard (1582-1637), perhaps the most prominent of the so-called Orthodox Lutheran dogmaticians and who had found in Arndt's personal counsel the peace of conscience for which Luther had striven. Eric Lund has shown that Arndt's postils demonstrated a more traditional sense of the pious life, based on the means of grace, than he displayed in his devotional bestsellers [13], and Gerhard's work certainly did that. Both sought to nurture an intimate trust in Christ and the rhythm of



repentance that turns in horror and sorrow from sin to him.

Gerhard's *Sacred Meditations* grew out of a bout with serious illness as a young man, and it begins with thoughts on "the true recognition of sin": "every hour I think about death because death is looming every hour. Every hour I think of Judgment because an account must be rendered for every day at the Last Judgment. ... My actions are vain and useless, and many of my words are vain, and many of my thoughts are even vainer." [14] He responds, "To whom, then, should I flee? To you, O holy Christ, our only Redeemer and Savior. My sins are great, but your satisfaction is greater; my unrighteousness is great, but your righteousness is greater." [15] Indeed, "the foundation and beginning of a holy life is salutary repentance." [16] It leads to faith, "a lively and efficacious apprehension of Christ," uniting us again with our Savior, and producing all virtues. [17] Without Herberger's allegorical improvisations on biblical images, and with a strong emphasis on the use of the oral, written, and sacramental forms of God's Word, Gerhard moved on to the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of love and harmony, who "joins us to Christ through faith, ... to God through love, and ... unites us with our neighbor through loving affection." [18] The *Meditations* does not offer instruction in the conduct of daily life as Gerhard does in his postils, but Meditation Twenty-Eight does present "general rules for a godly life": "Live dutifully toward God, upright with regard to yourself, and justly toward your neighbor. Act graciously toward your friends, patiently with your enemies, benevolently toward everyone, and also generously, as far as you are able. While you live, die daily to yourself and to your vices, so that when you die, you may live unto God. Show mercy always in the disposition of your mind, kindness in your countenance, humility in your manner. Modesty in your dealings with others, and patience in tribulation." [19] The focus on the personal attitude and

disposition received here no guidance for taking larger social responsibilities seriously, though that realm was not neglected in the preaching of the period.

Jonathan Strom's study of the reform efforts of the "orthodox" clergy of Rostock in the third quarter of the seventeenth century shows a deep concern among clergy and other civic leaders over the increasing "unfaithfulness" of the laity, despite active participation by most in the religious obligations of worship attendance and outward conformity to the commandments. The sermonic call for repentance sounded constantly from their pulpits. [20] Johann Jakob Fabricius promoted reform efforts in behalf of the integrity of the church over against secular authorities and the lives of the faithful in Schwelm (county of Mark), earning dismissal from office. [21] Princes could also support the cultivation of piety: Ernst the Pious of Saxe-Gotha was a good example of the pious prince who strove to inculcate religion among his subjects, though with at best mixed success. Alongside any question of "success" is the question of how skillfully any of these authors actually employed Luther's distinction of law and gospel, to what extent they grounded the performance of the Christian in the promise of life fashioned by God in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

These examples from "Orthodox" church leaders remind us that the work of Philip Jakob Spener, who regarded himself as Orthodox and was so regarded by many who claimed the title themselves, did not inaugurate concern for abuses of the gospel in the people's and the clergy's way of life. Many "Orthodox" preachers and professors anticipated Spener's hope to enlighten "eyes of understanding to discern what is the hope of our calling, what are the riches of God's glorious inheritance for his saints, and how boundless is God's strength in us who believe that his mighty power is effectual," to foster "diligence and zeal to be

of good cheer and to strengthen others who may grow faith," as well as "strength and courage" to pursue the Christian life and "blessing and success to observe with joy that the Word that goes for from God's mouth ... shall not return to God empty but shall accomplish that which he purposes and prosper in the thing for which he sent it." [22] Spener criticized civic leadership, clergy practices, and "defects in the common people," especially lovelessness, unfaithfulness in hearing and reading God's Word, drunkenness, resort to law courts to gain advantage over one another, selfishness and exploitation of the poor, and neglect of public worship. Spener believed that he was reviving the "reformational" program of Luther and his colleagues. Indeed, that program continued to be reflected in a variety of ways and combinations in Lutheran churches throughout subsequent generations. As with many of the representatives of the tradition mentioned throughout this essay, Spener understood the various elements of Lutheran piety or discipleship in his own way, but he did strive to deliver God's Word in oral, written, and sacramental forms to call sinners to repentance and to comfort and console the repentant, and to move them to service to God and the neighbor in their various callings.

The Enlightened cultural domination of the Lutheran churches in Germany and, in milder form, in the Nordic lands, during the eighteenth century considerably weakened Lutheran piety because it altered perceptions of Christ, sin atonement, and the nature and power of God's Word. It at least partially gave way to the confessional revival of the nineteenth century. Both periods demand more study.

A few disconnected observations about these more recent eras in Lutheran history. In this lecture we have ignored Nordic church life. It reflected many of the same tendencies of the German scene, but especially in the nineteenth century the history of efforts to cultivate faithful living in daily life cannot be

written without taking into account the varied efforts of Hans Nielsen Hauge and others in Norway, Carl Olof Rosenius and his Swedish comrades in the revival of Lutheran piety, figures like Nikolai Frederik Severin Grundtvig or Johann Vilhelm Beck in Denmark, and Lars Levi Laestadius, whose influence crossed into Finland, where Fredrik Gabriel Hedberg and others led comparable revivals of the faith and life in the Lutheran tradition.

Such movements emphasized foreign and domestic mission, outreach with the gospel to those outside the church and outside the faith. They often cultivated small group Bible study and prayer, as did Wilhelm Löhe, for they followed Luther and Spener in their belief that faithful hearing and reading of Scripture lay at the heart of the cultivation of piety or discipleship.

Another stray observation about this later period: It is easy to misrepresent Lutheran views of the active participation of the Christian in society in the nineteenth century, for it is such a multi-faceted topic. As in many other sectors of European society, some who had earlier advocated a loosening of royal power turned against political Liberalism in the wake of the revolts of 1848. [23] Despite the efforts of those such as Johann Hinrich Wichern (1808-1881) and others, congregations in the larger, industrializing cities failed to minister to the boys and girls from peasant villages who came to better themselves in the new factories of the burgeoning manufacturing areas or in the homes of their managers and owners. The church's failure to address the social and spiritual needs of these internal emigrants from the villages produced the turn to Marxist labor unions that significantly reduced the Christian role in central and northern European lands.

Yet "quietist" cannot describe all nineteenth-century Lutherans. Lutherans were active in giving cultural and political leadership in some lands in the nineteenth century though not

all were equally pious in terms of their personal faith. Louis Kossuth (1802-1894), a Hungarian nobleman and faithful member of his local congregation as well as the larger church, led the revolt of his people against Austrian Habsburg domination in 1848-1849. Kossuth escaped the clutches of the Habsburg government and lived in exile until his death. Another case of Lutheran cultural leadership took place in Hungary's Slovakian domains. A Lutheran pastor, an opponent of a proposed merger of Lutheran and Calvinist churches in the Hungarian kingdom, the Slovak Jozef Miloslav Hurban (1817-1888), along with his brother pastor Michal Miloslav Hodza (1811-1870), and the author and politician Ludovit Stur (1815-1856), helped create literary Slovak and were active in opposition to Hungarian domination of their people. These Slovaks campaigned against the abuse of alcohol among their people as fiercely as did Hans Nielsen Hauge (1771-1824) in Norway. These church leaders all took some latter-day version of Luther's understanding of the callings of daily life, which had not been clearly passed on in the great theological works of the periods, seriously. They understood that God had placed them in positions of service to their societies and cultures.

We have not only ignored Nordic and Eastern European Lutherans, but we have also neglected to mention that in the Majority World churches, both immigrant and mission, new forms of piety have developed among Lutherans, a mixture of their heritage brought by the missionaries and their own cultures. They have experienced and experimented with how to take Wittenberg theology seriously at the level of daily life in ways that can be helpful as those in the lands of historic establishment Lutheranism and their cousins in the lands of emigration, as we move into the new situations imposed upon us by the weakening of the Christian tone of traditional Western cultures.

Perhaps, however, the most important question we face as we look

at the more recent history of Lutheranism is why in the last two hundred years, and particularly in the last fifty years, have Lutherans not done a better job at the task of the cultural translation of our understanding of the pious Christian life into the world of today. Many answers may be offered, from the power of media and our failure to capitalize on new developments as quickly as Luther did, to the demise of the culture and more immediate communities around us that supported that piety instead of undermined it. But the most basic reasons that command our attention lie at the foundation of our existence as believers, hearers, disciples, children of God in his congregation. We need to examine again the ways in which we deliver the promise of life from and in Jesus Christ to his people. We need to work on the ways in which both the law and the gospel speak to people who conceive of sin and evil and of life, its sources and its several dimensions in much different ways than their parents and certainly than their forbearers several generations ago.

From Lamin Sanneh we have learned that the church cannot help but be enculturated, by the very design of the Creator, just as the culture in which the proclamation of Christ is heard cannot help but be bent at least a little out of its old shape by the presence of the biblical message. These facts bring both blessings and dangers, especially since sinners seem sinfully naturally to tend to two false perceptions of fundamental reality. The first divides the spiritual and the material, the "sacred" and the "profane," ignoring the more fundamental demarcation between Creator and creatures, often because there is no grasp of the personal and speaking nature of the Ultimate and Absolute. The second, perhaps because of the absence of the personal God who can be gracious and who likes to be in conversation, involves the focus on human performance of one kind or another as the defining action for humanity rather than

recognizing that human actions only proceed from God's performance as the Creator and Re-Creator, in the cross and resurrection. Apart from the Holy Spirit, we have no ears to hear that re-creative Word that proceeds from cross and empty tomb.

These false teachings are bad because they lead to false trusting and false living, that is, to false following, which bends the core of our persons and personalities out of shape. Bent personalities produce bent actions, twisted works, no matter how good they appear. In the face of that phenomenon Luther called good works detrimental to salvation and Gerhard Forde received his sweatshirt stating "weak on sanctification." Both were avid advocates of discipleship, in fact, but discipleship just looks different in a Lutheran context. It begins with listening and it never stops listening, even as the words it hears from the mouth of the Lord drive it into action—common, ordinary ways of action in the midst of details of daily life that are the mechanics of God's created order.

Therefore, our challenges include experimenting with how best to dedicate all the developing forms of communication and the cultural phenomena they foster and by which they are nurtured, so that the Word that kills and makes alive can do its tasks anew. We need to figure out how to speak with those whose sense of personal responsibility and desire to justify themselves on their own terms does not permit them to hear the law as accusing and killing. For them the conversation can still begin, in Luther's language, in any of its crushing and terrifying forms. Today's hearers also need what Lutherans have not needed in most of their cultural settings previously: aid within God-forsaking societies to raise up their children in the ways that they are to go, in the footsteps of Christ, when the culture no longer helps point the way but designs detours through life that derail and disorient. For them the gospel of the forgiveness of sins,

which they must finally hear, can be prefaced by the good news of God's justifying those whom the world de-dignifies and renders unworthy for any number of reasons. For Christ died and rose to give life and deliverance also from all that others do to us to make us victims of their sins. In a world in which speech is recognized as performative, the additional insight of how God's speech re-creates and renews is one of our easier tasks. Luther's affirmation of the God-pleasing goodness of life in this world, in all its realms and situations, is also tailor-made for adaptation to twenty-first-century hearers. Like Luther, we follow in Christ's footsteps, pushed along by the Holy Spirit, into the world that belongs to our Father, and we are moving to reclaim it and its inhabitants for the family.

#### Endnotes

[1] See Heinrich Grimm, "Die deutschen 'Teufelbücher' des 16. Jahrhunderts. Ihre Rolle im Buchwesen und ihre Bedeutung," *Archiv für die Geschichte des Buchwesens* 16 (1959).

[2] These works by Musculus and Spangenberg are discussed in Robert Kolb, "The Devil & the Well-Born. Proclamation of the Law to the Privileged in the Late Reformation," in *Let Christ Be Christ, Theology, Ethics & World Religions in the Two Kingdoms, Essays in Honor of . . . Charles L. Manske*, ed. Daniel N. Harmelink (Huntington Beach, CA: Tentatio, 1999), 161-171.

[3] See Christopher Boyd Brown, "Devotional Life in Hymns, Liturgy, Music, and Prayer," in *Lutheran Ecclesiastical Culture*, 205-258; cf. on the use of such literature and other forms of popular piety, see Robert Christman, "The Pulpit and the Pew: Shaping popular Piety in the Late Reformation," *ibid.*, 259-303.

[4] Janis Kresliņš, *Dominus narrabit in scriptura populorum. A Study of Early Seventeenth-Century Lutheran Teaching and Preaching in the Lettische lang-gewünschte Postill of Georg Mancelius* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1992).

[5] Johann Heerman (1585-1647): *Prediger in Schlesien zur Zeit des Dreißigjährigen Krieges* (Münster: LIT Verlag, 2003).



- [6] Valerius Herberger, *The Great Works of God. Parts One and Two: The Mysteries of Christ in the Book of Genesis*, Chapter 1-15, trans. Matthew Carner (Saint Louis: Concordia, 2010), 15.
- [7] *Ibid.*, 58.
- [8] *Ibid.*, 83.
- [9] *Ibid.*, 96-101.
- [10] *Ibid.*, 245-251.
- [11] The following discussion relies heavily on Theodor Mahlmann: "Die Stellung der unio cum Christo in der lutherischen Theologie des 17. Jahrhunderts, in *Unio. Gott und Mensch in der nachreformatorischen Theologie*, ed. Matti Repo and Rainer Vinke, Helsinki: Luther-Agricola-Gesellschaft, 1996, 72-199.
- [12] Lund, "'modus docendi mysticus': The Interpretation of the Bible in Johann Arndt's *Postilla*," in: *Hermeneutica Sacra. Studien zur Auslegung der Heiligen Schrift im 16.- und 17. Jahrhundert / Studies of the Interpretation of Holy Scripture in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, Torbjörn Johansson, Robert Kolb, and Johann Anselm Steiger (eds.) (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2010).
- [13] Eric Lund, "'modus docendi mysticus.' The Interpretation of the Bible in Johann Arndt's *Postilla*" in *Hermeneutica sacra. Studien zur Auslegung der Heiligen Schrift im 16.- und 17. Jahrhundert / Studies of the Interpretation of Holy Scripture in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, ed. Torbjörn Johansson et al. (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2010).
- [14] *Seventeenth-Century Lutheran Meditations and hymns*, ed. Eric Lund (New York: Paulist Press, 2011), 43.
- [15] *Ibid.*, 45.
- [16] *Ibid.*, 48.
- [17] *Ibid.*, 71.
- [18] *Ibid.*, 94-95.
- [19] *Ibid.*, 112.
- [20] Jonathan Strom, *Orthodoxy and Reform: The Clergy in Seventeenth Century Rostock* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1999).
- [21] Harm Klueting, *Reformatio vitae Johann Jakob Fabricius (1618/1620)-1673. Ein Beitrag zu Konfessionalisierung und Sozialdisziplinierung im Luthertum des 17. Jahrhunderts*

(Münster: LIT Verlag, 2003).

[22] Philip Jacob Spener, Pia Desideria, trans. Theodore g. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1964), 30-31. The historical introduction to this edition is filled with errors and so must be used with caution.

[23] Angelika Dörfler-Dierken, Luthertum und Demokratie. Deutsche und amerikanische Theologen des 19. Jahrhunderts zu Staat, Gesellschaft und Kirche (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2001).

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# Discipleship in the Lutheran Tradition

Colleagues,

If “mission,” our general theme for these past many weeks, is a hot topic in the church at large these days, so is “discipleship.” It stands to reason. The one requires the other. Who can be sent-missioned, if you will-unless they know what the sending is for and are ready to serve the one who sends them? Mission agents need training, in other words, and if the mission they serve is Christ’s they need intense training of a sort that

God alone is able to accomplish. St. Mark's Gospel is especially vivid on that point.

That said, what's the training about and what does it aim to achieve? The Church's multitude of traditions continue to answer that in many and often conflicting ways. Today's offering brings you Luther's view of it and begins to explore how that view played out among subsequent bearers of the Law/Gospel tradition. What you're getting is the first half of a paper delivered at January's Crossings conference, the theme of which was discipleship. The author is Robert Kolb, Missions Professor of Systematic Theology (Emeritus) at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis and, famously, co-editor of the latest and definitive English translation of the Book of Concord. Dr. Kolb's scholarship is prodigious. We learned in January that he's been spending six months of every year poring through archives in Germany that bear on the development of the Lutheran tradition over the centuries. You'll see abundant fruits of that research as you read, not only now but next week too, when we send you the second half of his paper. His assignment at the conference was to tell us what our Lutheran forebears understood discipleship to be, and how they practiced it. You'll be surprised, we're guessing, by his opening observation. Then you'll be enriched by the wealth of what follows. It bears a close and careful reading, especially today when too many Lutherans, intent on "making disciples," are repeating old mistakes that Luther et al. corrected. More on that two weeks from now.

Peace and Joy,  
Jerry Burce, for the editors

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The History of Discipleship in the Lutheran Tradition

If we wished to be fundamentalistic, we could make this a very

short lecture. Even though Luther used the words for “disciple” and “discipleship,” in his translation of Scripture, the word itself did not become a part of Lutheran theological vocabulary until much later, perhaps first in the twentieth century—Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s *Nachfolge* (he did not think it was necessary to mention the cost in the title) being the first, or at least one of the first, major work promoting the vocabulary in our tradition.

On the other hand, trying to survey in forty-five minutes, what Lutherans have emphasized in their teaching of the Christian life is an impossibly large task since different cultural situations and different eras have made a variety of demands on Christian leaders’ thinking about what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. So this lecture will only try to use some examples and observations, mostly from the first two centuries of Lutheran history, to provoke our thinking about our own following in the footsteps of the one who has buried our sinful identities and raised us up to walk in his footsteps as trusting children of God.

The lecture will offer some positive examples of faithfulness to Luther’s insights into the nature of the life of faith, fostered in repentance through the proper distinction of law and gospel, but negative examples of straying from Luther’s insights also abound. The lesson to be drawn from this historical picture admonishes us to remember that we stand always in the midst of the eschatological battle between God and Satan, between the truth of Jesus and the devil’s deception, which seeks to weaken and misdirect the faith that creates the believer’s person as a child of God.

The dynamic equivalent of “disciple” in Wittenbergese was simply “believer” [Gläubiger] or “listener” [Zuhörer] or “child in the congregation” [Pfarrkind]. Some in our day may protest that

“believer” is something less than a disciple, only the starting point. But Luther, Melanchthon, their students, and their students’ students believed that if you trusted in the Lord above all that he had made, you would do what the logic of faith makes inevitable: those who have been buried with Christ and raised with him walk in his footsteps.

Many Reformation historians today are emphasizing the continuities between late medieval piety and Luther’s thought [1]; the continuities should not surprise us since the most original of human geniuses have been the products of their time and carried much of whatever traditions they inherited with them into their new way of thinking. At the same time, however, Luther remains the most celebrated sixteenth-century denizen of the planet not because of the continuities but because he transformed the basic definition of what it means to be Christian. He abandoned the definition of the Middle Ages—a religion conceived of within the framework of pre-Christian Germanic worship of the gods, in which ritual performance of sacred rites and practices insured the relationship between God and human creatures. If ritual secured the individual Christian’s life, the hierarchy secured the life of church and society in this system.

Luther turned instead to the definition he found to be biblical—a life of trust in the Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier, who is a God of conversation and community, a life which proceeds from God’s address to his human creatures in his Word, in all its several forms. In that definition the entire life of the Christian is determined by the fundamental relationship of love and trust that stems from listening to God’s Word and turns into a life of praise to God and service to other people. Ritual and liturgy are not absent from the life of the church in his vision of Christian living; they serve as vehicles and setting for the proclamation of God’s Word in all

its forms and the response in the believers' praise and prayer. The daily life of believers is complicated by the presence of sin and evil, which create the situation in which God's law must crush false faiths and their symptoms, so that his gospel promises can re-create that trust that defines the fullness of our humanity. Medieval ritual performance gave way to faithful hearing of God's Word as the key to the dynamic equivalent of what we call discipleship.

### The Dynamic Equivalent of Discipleship in Luther's Thought

The first element of Luther's understanding of discipleship focused on the communicating God and the trust that defines human life by defining him as the source of all good and a refuge in every time of need—the ultimate source of our core sense of identity, security, and meaning. On the basis of this redefinition of what a Christian is—a hearer of God's Word, one who trusts in him through Christ, and who lives a life as a joyful child of God in Christ—Luther also transformed the word “fromm” “upright,” the kind of person you want for a neighbor, into a word which carried the connotation of a faith-based life of new obedience—“pious” in the best sense of the word. Brian Brock notes that “the preoccupation of antique conceptions of ethics with individual flourishing is displaced in Luther by an inquiry into what it means to live with God, in which the dramatics of fellowship are emphasized. ... Luther's emphasis is on transformation into the form of Christ understood in terms of *Nachfolge*, the following of ... a God who is leading in time. ... Luther's is a dialogical ethic of hearing and speaking with God.” [2] The relationship between loving God and trusting child of God and hearer of his Word determined all of life. Luther presumed that God's newborn, re-created children reflect the fact that they are chips off the old block. That Luther seldom used the word discipleship need not distract us from the fact that he was very much concerned about *Nachfolge*, as the sense

and shape of the life of faith. For instance, his Small Catechism was designed to serve as a handbook for Christian living, on the basis of the personal acquaintanceship which its text, particularly that of the Creed, fosters.

The second element of Luther's understanding of discipleship stems from his placement of repentance—being turned from false gods to Jesus Christ—at the heart of daily Christian living. Luther's conception of how human life proceeds within God's greater history of dealing with his people shaped the reformer's understanding of daily life. He struggled his entire life with the mystery of the continuation of sin and evil in the lives of the baptized. Emerging from the penitential piety of the monastery, which had burdened him with his guilt over his sins in ways that the ever-easier pastoral discipline of the fifteenth century failed to alleviate, Luther recognized in the pattern of Israel's apostasies, God's call to repentance, Israel's return to faith and faithfulness, and its subsequent falling away a pattern for each individual believer's own history. He defined true biblical repentance as the heart of the daily Christian life: "the old creature in us with all sins and evil desires is to be drowned and die through daily contrition and repentance ... and daily a new person is to come forth and rise up to live before God in righteousness and purity forever." [3] Indeed, "the whole life of the Christian is a life of repentance," [4] of daily dying through the surrender of sinfulness to the buried Christ and the daily resurrection to a new life defined at its core by trust in the one in whose footsteps faith dares to follow. Convinced of the devil's power, Luther viewed everyday life in both the realm of faith and that of life as battlefields on which God's truth battled Satan's lie, Christ's gift of life stood under attack from the legions of the murderer, the great deceiver (John 8:44). The whole life of the Christian is part of the great eschatological conflict

between God and Satan. His reordering of the medieval program for instruction, the catechism, in his handbooks for catechism, placing law before gospel and the Christian life thereafter reflects this fundamental conviction about the shape of the believer's life.

A third element in Luther's understanding of faithful hearing and following in Christ's footsteps emerged from his supplanting of the medieval exaltation of "sacred" activities and the entire religious realm over the "profane," the everyday. He did not ignore those activities that reflected faith in Jesus, such as prayer and praise, but he emphasized that everything done in faith is God-pleasing (Rom. 14:23). Thus, to the instruction he gave in carrying out God's commands and practicing human virtues, e.g., in the Large Catechism, he added the framework of service in the responsibilities, the callings, of everyday living in home, economic activities, and the wider society, the *politia*. [5] To provide clues for living out this life Luther concluded his Small Catechism with instructions for daily meditation on God's Word and prayer and a table of succinct pointers on how to live within the structure of God's ordained situations according to his callings and commands.

A fourth observation about the shaping of Lutheran piety, from the days in which, according to a recent issue of *The Economist*, "Luther went viral" [6] until now. James Nestingen has pointed out that Luther's catechisms provided not only a linguistic but also a cultural translation of Latin models of conveying the faith. [7] Yale missiologist Lamin Sanneh points out that when such cultural translations take place, the culture experiences change from the input of the Christian message, and the message is shaped by the language and perceptions of the culture. [8] Among many very important cultural factors was the use of media, especially in two forms. The Reformation developed the potential and place of the sermon, locally prepared and delivered for the



most part, as the most effective way of shaping minds and lives of villagers, townspeople, and courtiers alike. It exploited the half-century-old but not yet fully developed potential of movable type for shaping minds and lives across a wide geographical area. Luther's catechetical revolution rode on the development of Gutenberg's way of printing as well as the rhetorical rules for oral delivery of the message which Melancthon was developing precisely for this purpose, among others. The development of the relationship of love and trust in God, as he has revealed himself as Jesus Christ, the daily dying and rising accomplished in repentance through the use of God's law and his gospel, the cultivation of new obedience through the motivation of the gospel according to instruction given in the law all took place through the use of God's Word, in oral, written, and sacramental forms. It is a commonplace that, although the Wittenberg Reformation took place to a large extent as an oral event, it was fueled and driven by effective use of the printing press. [9] We dare not lose sight of both verbal components as integral parts of this Way of the Word: Lutherans have always lived from what was said and what was read. Sermons, absolution, and the mutual conversation and consolation of Christians with one another live from and foster the reading of the Word in Scripture and every other form of Christian literature as the agents by which repentance and faith are created and new obedience finds its forms.

A negative cultural factor in the development of the Lutheran way of ecclesiastical life came with the inevitability of continuing a close association with political power. All cultures need a religious element, but they need it for social and political purposes. Establishment of such an official religion always brings with it social-cultural obligations that always fall in the realm of the law, not necessarily but often to the disadvantage of the gospel. Lutheran churches were not

unaffected by such developments.

### The Second Generation

To a large (though varying) extent, Luther's students and adherents in the sixteenth century caught these profound changes in the understanding of basic concepts and conceptions of the faith. Throughout the following centuries the most perceptive of those claiming the name "Lutheran" have understood that, as Erik Erikson told us without being Luther's disciple, trust determines human personhood and personality, and that the object of our ultimate and absolute trust determines much of the way we act, or at least want to act.

Luther's students and adherents also used many of the same rhetorical tools and other methods which they had learned from him and Melanchthon. Lutherans were initially, for the most part, listeners because many could not read or write. During the last half millennium, they have generally recognized that, as Luther observed, oral forms of communicating the gospel that arise from Scripture, such as the sermon and catechism instruction as well as absolution and the mutual conversation and consolation of Christians with one another, have played an important role in Lutheran cultivation of Christian living in every era. But the printing press did serve Luther and Melanchthon well, and their followers put its technology to use with skill. Devotional literature, catechisms, sermon books, and hymnals have cultivated Lutheran following in Christ's footsteps in every era.

In the first and second generations after Luther and Melanchthon had launched the profound alteration in the perceived form and shape of Christian faith and life, the emphasis on trust in the suffering and dying Savior, and on his resurrection, remained clearly at the heart of Lutheran preaching. The sermons in the postils and other printed homiletical works, including funeral

sermons, focused on what Christ has done for sinners and on their need for the working of both law and gospel in their daily lives. The mortification of the flesh and the call of the Holy Spirit to cling to Christ remained a key to at least the published preacher's message. But even as Luther had been most concerned about giving his hearers and readers clear, forthright instruction in what to do to live in trust toward God by following his plan for human living—for instance, in his Wartburg Postil of 1521/1522—so his students and followers also focused repeatedly and strongly on helping their congregations understand what God wanted them to do as his trusting children, where many of them were straying from his plan, and how they should carry out their callings by obeying his commands.

Much Lutheran literature aimed at the fostering of trust in the Savior and care for the neighbor by grounding the hearer's understanding of human existence in the Scriptural address of the sinner/saint and deepening the desire of believers to fear, love, trust God above all else and to love the neighbor as oneself. Luther had designed his Small Catechism for use by parents in cultivating the faith of their children and servants. His ideal of a life guided by meditation on the catechism took concrete form in the second section of the Small Catechism, in which children were to learn the discipline of consideration of the content of Scripture in the form of the commandments, creed, and Lord's Prayer and response in prayer.

His colleagues and students were convinced of the importance of home devotions for the nurture of faith and new obedience: Some sixteen years after Luther's death his friend Nikolaus von Amsdorf penned a critique of parental irresponsibility in neglecting the regular preparation of children and servants for Sunday morning services, and the review of the sermon, particularly its admonitions and its comfort, afterwards. [10]

This devotional discipline did take place in the home of the Saxon court physician and municipal physician, Matthaeus Ratzeburger, whose personal practice of the devotional life is chronicled in the account of the doctor's dying days by his pastor Andreas Poach. Before he turned to Hippocrates and Galen, the physician began the day by reading a half or whole chapter of the Bible, along with Luther's interpretation of the passage. Early mornings he read Luther's commentaries on Genesis, Joel and other prophets, and his Galatians commentary (which he had read several times), as well as the volumes of Luther's Works as they came from the presses, first the Wittenberg edition and then the Jena. His volumes contained underlining, little crosses in the margin, and other notations. Afternoons and evenings at table he read the German Bible or the appropriate sermons from Luther's Hauspostille or Kirchenpostille or some other German work of Luther for his wife and children. On Saturday evenings he read to his children and servants from Luther's Large Catechism and heard their recitation of the Small Catechism. Sunday mornings he read his older sons passages from the Latin Bible or Luther's commentary on Genesis. Ratzeburger read the Bible and Luther's works not only for his own benefit. He also applied their message to others. When visitors stopped by, the physician often told them what he had been reading and "applied it to our own times and activities, for our instruction, comfort, and warning." [11]

In fact, most families seem not to have been capable of meeting Luther's expectations and Ratzeburger's example, but the tradition of catechization remained strong in late sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Lutheran churches. Preaching the catechism, continuing the chief medieval mode of offering instruction, was mandated in most church orders, but increasingly pastors or schoolteachers also used Luther's catechisms and the flood of expansions of them that appeared

throughout the period to train up children in the way that they were to go. At every level of learning, from primary school to university catechetics, throughout the period, from Johann Spangenberg's early supplements to Luther from 1541 and 1542 to Conrad Dietrich's range of catechisms and university textbooks, pastors and professors contributed to the burgeoning body of manuals of the faith, which sometimes justified the judgment of Hans-Jürgen Fraas, who saw an "Akademisierung des Katechismus"—a trend toward theoretical language and detailed information. [12] This judgment compares apples and oranges, to a large extent, for the expansions of the catechism were aimed at upper level students in many cases. Nonetheless, most perpetuated Luther's understanding of the catechism as instruction not only for the head, but for heart and hand as well. The way of life that this instruction molded found its grounding in faith in Christ even when the balance of emphasis shifted to the law, as it inevitably does in instructing children, also through the Lutheran catechisms, which strove to serve as handbooks for Christian living. [13]

The catechisms taught people who also absorbed the faith from a variety of other forms of literature. In sermons and devotional literature the successors of the Wittenberg reformers continued to present God's structure for daily life in terms of his calling his people into specific vocations in home, economic life, society, and congregation. There they were to live the life of new obedience to God's commands, living out the virtues that God had designed for good human living, avoiding the vices that Satan was trying to seduce them to practice. The charge of some social historians that Lutheran pastors functioned merely as agents of socialization in slavish service of their rulers is false; it ignores not only Luther's call that preachers serve as critics and consciences for their princes but also the bare facts of continuing, often sharp, criticism and calls for

repentance for abusing powers that came from Lutheran pulpits throughout the early modern period.

But a kernel of truth lies behind the charge, too. For good Christians make good citizens and subjects, these preachers were convinced. They rebuked and condemned the practice of vice as well as the failure to trust in God, and they, like Luther, offered many positive suggestions for the practice of new obedience, in the realms of family life and economic activity especially. Yet many were anything but the legendary toadies of princes they are often reputed to be. Repeatedly in their postils they admonished princes and municipal counselors to behave according to God's law and to practice justice. Repeated stories of the exiles of Lutheran pastors throughout the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries—most prominently, the hymnist Paul Gerhardt—confirm that they followed Luther's admonition to preserve the peace by calling rulers to repentance so that their subjects would have no cause for discontent and their God would not send his wrath upon their unjust practices.

## Endnotes

[1] Prominent among them has been Bernd Hamm; see the collection of his essays, *Religiosität im späten Mittelalter. Spannungspole, Neuaufbrüche, Normierungen*, ed. (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011).

[2] Brian Brock, *Singing the Ethos of God. On the Place of Christian Ethics in Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 165-166.

[3] SC Baptism 4, BC 360.

[4] SC, Table of Christian Callings, BC365-367.

[5] SC Confession and Absolution, 20, BC 360.

[6] "How Luther went viral," *The Economist*, December 17th, 2011: 93-96.

[7] James A. Nestingen, "Luther's Cultural Translation of the Catechism," *Lutheran Quarterly* 15 (2001), 440-452.

[8] Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message. The Missionary*

Impact on Culture (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1989).

[9] Mark U. Edwards, Jr., *Printing, Propaganda, and Martin Luther* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), e.g., 1-2, 11, 37, 172.

[10] Robert Kolb, "Parents Should Explain the Sermon, Nikolaus von Amsdorf on the Role of the Christian Parent," *The Lutheran Quarterly* 25 (1973): 231-240.

[11] *Vom Christlichen Abschied aus diesem sterblichen Lebgen des lieben thewren Mannes Matthei Ratzenbergers der Artzney Doctors Bericht durch Andrean Poach Pfarherrn zun Augustinern in Erffurdt/ vnd andere/ So dabey gewesen/ kurtz zusammen gezogen. Anno Domini M. D. LIX. Mense Ianuario* (Jena 1559), A2b-A3b. See Robert Kolb, "Ars moriendi lutherana, Andreas Poachs Schrift 'Vom Christlichen Abschied aus diesem sterblichen Leben . . . Matthei Ratzenbergers' (1559)," in *Vestigia pietatis. Studien zur Geschichte der Frömmigkeit in Thüringen und Sachsen. Ernst Koch gewidmet*, ed. Gerhard Graf, Hans-Peter Hasse et al. (Herbergen der Christenheit: Sonderband 5; Leipzig, 2000), 95-112.

[12] See Hans-Jürgen Fraas, *Katechismustradition. Luthers kleiner Katechismus in Kirche und Schule* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1971) 72. Fraas suggests that Melanchthon's *Catechesis puerilis* (1540) is an early example of an academic catechism.

[13] See Gerhard Bode, "Instruction of the Christian Faith by Lutherans after Luther," in *Lutheran Ecclesiastical Culture, 1550-1675*, Robert Kolb, ed. (Leiden: Brill, 2008) 159-204.

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# Mission in the Secular American Academy

Colleagues,

Last week we heard a pastor, Mark Greenthaner, reflect on his work in Australian Lutheran schools that embrace the mission of Christ as a defining characteristic of their identity. This week's offering is a counterpoint of sorts to Mark's observations. The author, our own Carol Braun, is a lay polymath whose vocation as teacher unfolds in a secular academy in New York City. You'll get the details directly from her. More to the point, you'll hear her thinking out loud about her calling as a double-agent missionary (my term, not hers) who serves two distinct missions, one secular, the other anchored in Christ. I, for one, am especially struck by her description of the values that shape and drive her students. Give some thought as you read to how these values manifest the law of God in its operative and ultimately deadly glory and, in doing that, necessitate the breathtaking gift and promise of Christ. This being noted, thanks be to God for Carol and every other Christ-truster—our churches are filled with them—who salt the earth day after day with their love for the driven children of God that Jesus died for.

Peace and Joy,

Jerry Burce, for the editorial team

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I teach physics, math, and English at a private high school with no religious affiliation. I therefore spend more time every day



talking with teenagers than with anyone else. Many of them are the children of immigrants, and their cultural backgrounds are diverse. They come from a variety of faith traditions, and many of them have no religion at all. The fact is, I don't know what percentage of them are religious, because we rarely talk about our own religious beliefs. In part, that's because we're busy discussing other things—how to find the range of a projectile, or solve a quadratic equation, or make sense of Shakespeare. But of course there's more to it than that. Even in our downtime, during free periods or after school, I hesitate to bring up my own religious beliefs and practices, or to ask my students about their spiritual lives. Having taught here for four years, I can count on one hand—practically on one finger—the number times I've had a frank discussion with my students or even my colleagues about the non-secular aspects of my life.

So, do I consider myself to be a missionary to the secular American academy? Not really. Certainly not in any kind of overt or straightforward way. In short, that's not my job. The academy has its own mission of pursuing secular truth through the teaching and learning of the arts, sciences, and humanities. My job here is to support that secular mission. In a sense, though, I suppose that anyone who spends Sunday morning in a pew, and who spends private moments in prayer, and who reads the Bible at home, is a kind of missionary—or emissary, or person who's sent—into the secular weekday world. As I interact with my students, I sometimes find myself wondering how they might respond to the Gospel if they heard it. How would it sound to them, if they haven't heard it already? Is it something they're yearning to hear, even if they don't realize it? Or would it strike them as superfluous, irrelevant, absurd?

To put the question another way: Who are the young people who are being formed today by the multicultural, secular academic institutions like the one I now call home? What motivates them?

What's important to them? What do they want? And how do those motives and values, needs and desires, intersect with the things God wants for them? Even if no one is confessing the Gospel of Christ within the walls of the academy, it's still likely that, where confession does happen, it sometimes falls on ears that have been shaped by this kind of secular institution. How might the Church's message sound to those ears?

I often have rather explicit discussions with students about what they want—if not out of life, then at least out of the next few steps in their education. One recent conversation comes to mind: A ninth-grader was working on his application to a rigorous extracurricular science program at a prestigious New York university. He asked for my feedback on his application essay, in which he sought to explain why he was interested in the program. In the essay he listed his many accomplishments and awards in math and science, and his longtime dream of becoming a doctor. He gave explicit credit to his parents for supporting him in his career goal, explaining how they provided him with books and supplies to advance his scientific interests. Finally, at the end of the essay, he said that he hoped the challenges of the university's program would add to his record of outstanding academic achievements. As we reached the end of the essay, I asked him to dig deeper: "*Why* do you want to add to your list of academic achievements?" He answered quickly and candidly: he sought further achievements because they gave him a sense of accomplishment, and because (in his words) they brought honor to his family. He added, rather urgently, "*I need to get in.*"

This drive toward success, tied closely to a sense of responsibility to one's parents, is very common among the students I teach. In most cases, I get the impression that the students come from homes that are loving rather than draconian, and that with their parents' high expectations comes an equal measure of caring support. The students themselves are driven

both by their parents' expectations and, even at a young age, by their own conviction that they need to work hard to reach or surpass their parents' own levels of achievement. College (especially getting into a "good college") is a major stepping stone toward that goal. In my first year of teaching, when I asked my class why they'd decided to take physics, over half of them said "Because it looks good on a college application." The next year I decided not to ask.

Of course, in the process of striving for achievement and honor, most of my students discover that they have a genuine passion for some of the things they're asked to do. They develop a taste not just for the general glow of success but also for the pure joy of doing something that they love and excel at—be it in the classroom or art studio, on stage or on the basketball court. In the context of the secular academy, this kind of natural passion is cherished as a precious resource: it drives young people to pour their efforts into the pursuit of truth and excellence—not for the building up for their own glory but, it seems, from some kind of higher motive. Such a person, within the academy, can be trusted as the truest and best member of the community: someone who is unlikely to commit academic sins like plagiarism or cheating or poor sportsmanship, and who serves as a natural role model to others. Confidence has its place in academic circles, but among university professors and high school teachers alike I have often observed an institutional reverence for humility, especially when coupled with outstanding achievement.

In this context, I often think about the Christian notion of devoting one's life work to the greater glory of God—the idea of putting your life in God's hands and asking him to make you an instrument for the accomplishment of his will on earth. In response to the question "why do you want to do what you're doing," the Christian has answers quite different from those given by her secular counterparts.

A closely related question that's also on the minds of thoughtful high school students is, "What responsibility do I have to others?" The secular American academy generally honors those who serve the poor and unfortunate. This is reflected, for example, in my school's policies of rewarding and requiring community service. I've heard students complain about peers who (rumor has it) use community service as yet another way to pad their college resumes. I've also heard a surprising number of them say that, while they initially balked at being "forced" to serve others, they came to derive a real sense of fulfillment and purpose from the experience. This leaves open the question, however, of why they do what they do. I've gotten into some rather heady discussions with eleventh- and twelfth-graders about altruism and whether they can be truly altruistic if they're motivated by their own desire to give their lives purpose and meaning. In general, those discussions end with the conclusion that yes, altruism is possible. But at such moments, especially, I've found myself strongly tempted to reveal how my understanding of service is colored by my Christian worldview, which casts all humans as beloved children of God, and which casts charitable love for others as a fitting and God-willed response to the love he gives to us. Again, on this point, I sense that the Christian has answers which the secular seeker might find intriguingly different.

This brings me to the question of what it is that God wills for these young people shaped by the secular academy, regardless of whether or not they think they have any use for him. I don't know how to answer the question of how the Church might frame its confession of the Gospel so as to ring true in the ears of these young people. I don't even know if that's a useful question to be asking. But I do know, from the Gospel itself, what it is that God wants for them: simply put, he wants them for himself. He loves them and yearns (1 Timothy 2:3-4) for all

of them to be saved and come into knowledge of the truth personified in his son Jesus. And in this sense at least, I do see myself as a missionary to the secular American academy, because I believe that God has sent me here to see all his children as he himself sees them-as his beloved sons and daughters, each one precious to him. The thought that some of God's love for them can be channeled through my own love for them is the best motivation I have for doing the job that I do.

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# 1) Think Christ. 2) Rethink Church

Colleagues,

We have two items for you this week.

First, yesterday was Ash Wednesday. Forty years and five days ago the late, great Robert W. Bertram graced a chapel service at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, with a stunning little homily entitled "[Pardon My Dying: A Sequel to Ash Wednesday.](#)" If you don't know it, click on the hyperlink in the previous sentence and read it now. It will take all of five minutes. I watched a study group of ten or so long-experienced saints read through it this past Tuesday. Along the way I heard some sharp intakes of breath. A tear or two glistened. At the end I saw faces shining with the look a person gets when he or she has just heard the promise of Christ as never before. No wonder those of us who know the piece well keep returning to it year after year. Shame on us if we let this week go by without passing the treasure along.

Speaking of passing the treasure to others, we bring you as today's Topic Two another installment in our series of the past several weeks on the general subject of mission. So far we've heard from Dick Gahl on books to read; from Paul Jaster on the mission of God as it unfolds in St. Mark; and from Peter Keyel on NFL football as a source for the kind of simile and metaphor that will help deliver the Gospel goods to American ears in 2012. Today's contributor is Pastor Mark Greenthaner of the Lutheran Church of Australia (hereafter LCA, not be to be confused with the ELCA predecessor of the same initials). Mark will argue that to appreciate how the Spirit is delivering the goods in his part of the world today one needs a more expansive view of "church" than his Australian colleagues are in the habit of entertaining. I'm guessing his argument will find lots of sympathetic ears in America too, especially among those whose pastoral ministry unfolds in settings other than the standard organized congregation.

I might mention that Mark and I share a bit of history, both of us being sons of LCMS missionaries to Papua New Guinea who got shipped off to Lutheran boarding schools in Australia for our high school education. Mark opted to stay Down Under when high school was over. He received his theological and pastoral training at the LCA's Luther Seminary in Adelaide. That was in the late '70s. He has spent most of the time since serving in Lutheran schools as a teacher and chaplain, or in his distinctly Aussie way of putting it, as a "schools pastor." His call these days is to full-time ministry at Good Shepherd Lutheran Primary School in Croyden, an eastern suburb of Melbourne.

By the way, were this a back-and-forth between Mark and me I'd want to press him further on what precisely God wants to see delivered to the secular people he works with in Croyden. That noted, I think you'll appreciate his astute observations about things those folks in Croyden want a god-like somebody to say to

them. It will be interesting to see how this matches up with observations my colleague Carol Braun will be making about spiritual yearnings at a private and largely secular academy in Staten Island. That too is in the pipeline.

Peace and Joy,  
Jerry Burce, for the editors

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For much of the past 17 years, through my involvement in schools ministry I have spent much of my time ministering to those who would be considered as “unchurched,” that is, with children and their families who have either no significant links with the Church (of any denomination), or who have distant links with the Church that have grown inactive (for example, grandparents or parents who were actively involved in the Church at some stage). My experience of ministering to these people has indicated the following:

- Despite the well-documented fact that there has been an ongoing and significant decline in Sunday worship attendance and other church involvement in our Australian community, I do not think that people generally have dismissed the concept of God, nor dispensed with “grace,” “love one another,” “do good to one another,” and many other concepts which they would use to summarize “the Christian faith.” In fact, I have found students to be very receptive to the teaching of concepts which affirm and validate their own existence, and give them a strong sense of purpose in life.
- People have, on the other hand, dismissed their idea of “the Church” as a contemporary irrelevance and anachronism. To be more precise, they dismiss their conceptualization of the Church in this way. The “unchurched” do not really know what the Church is, but

retain an image (or even caricature) of the Church as they “remember” it from the time of their grandparents.

- Such people “dismiss” the Church primarily out of ignorance, not as the result of a deliberate and considered response to the Gospel or to the ministry of the Church. In fact, it may be unfair even to say that they “dismiss” the Church; it may be more accurate to say that they simply have never engaged in thinking about the church, nor its message, nor its leadership, nor its membership. If someone says, “The Church is irrelevant!” it may be that this statement would be more accurately put as, “I don’t really know what the Church is, or how it works these days, or who is in it, and I wouldn’t know if it is relevant or not, but I’m not about to say that I am ignorant when it comes to God, the Church, etc., and I am much more comfortable talking about the irrelevancy of the Church than about my own ignorance.”

The Church itself has, in many respects, reinforced this sense of estrangement and non-engagement by its own structures and practices. For hundreds of years the Church has assumed an important relationship between itself and other social institutions—particularly the family, government, and, therefore, education and welfare. For hundreds of years the Church has assumed that Sunday morning worship has been appropriate as the key, optimal reference point for most of its ministry for the majority of its members. It could well be argued that these assumptions have been invalid in Australia for many, many years. But the lack of validity has been hidden for various reasons:

- The Australian Church showed significant numerical growth, even though society was changing, during the years of postwar migration.
- The focus on modern issues of race, feminism,



globalization, ecology, Third World economics and the like has occupied the Church, as part of the society, in important and significant ways for the latter three decades of the 20th century, at the expense of understanding the impact of these years on common spirituality in our society, especially in relation to what we would consider core, fundamental concepts: e.g., creation, sin, grace, ecclesiology.

- The growth of the Roman Catholic Church in Australia through postwar migration meant a decline in the proportional significance of the Anglican Church, which possibly masked a concurrent decline in the status of the Anglican Church as the “established” church in Australia.
- The Lutheran Church of Australia, in particular, during the time when the community as a whole was struggling with key social and ideological issues, was positively focusing its energy on the bringing together of the two former churches. It was a time of celebration and thanksgiving, with the strong perception of significant forward movement. The LCA continued a strong and confident overseas mission presence in Papua New Guinea as the highlands were opened following WWII. Furthermore, continuing high birth levels among Lutherans, and postwar migration of northern Europeans (even into the late 70s) suggested ongoing numerical growth. And the economy was booming!

In the past decade what may have been hidden has become very clear. Numerically, the church is not growing (at least not in terms of those who formally identify themselves with the public institution). Sunday is no longer considered a sacrosanct day in the community. Multicultural Australia no longer affords the Christian Church, nor its leaders, any superior status in the establishment. Rather, it openly challenges traditional Christian values and their importance to contemporary Australian

society. I would suggest that Australians, at a number of levels, happily act in a fairly immature way with respect to the teachings of the Church, not as a well-considered, studied and debated response, but in a manner that demonstrates the antiauthoritarian and anti-institutional nature that is sometimes offered as a characteristic of the Australian psyche.

In summary, my experience suggests that Australians have big problems with the institution of the Church because

- they are a generation or two removed from it;
- they hold to some inaccurate caricatures based on a vague and distorted memory of the institution of several generations past;
- they have been disconnected from the pattern of life of the church by changes in culture and lifestyle across the whole Australian nation.

Furthermore, the Church has often confused criticism of its structures or practices with criticism of its fundamental doctrines.

I believe that the LCA's Mission At Home policy, together with changes in relation to the place of Lutheran Schools within the mission of the LCA, mark a significant turning point for the LCA. The Church now has committed itself, especially through its schools, to an intentional engagement with the "unchurched." We now recognize that our mission means going to people in the community rather than simply waiting for them to come to us.

I'll put this in another way. (Altogether too simply and crassly, for my comments here do not note the fact that God's Spirit, working through the means of grace, draws people into the Church, doing the hard work! Rather, I am examining the human form of involvement in this process.) Our traditional congregational model sees the congregation as the most accurate

representation of a community of Christians. Its existence depends entirely on the voluntary contribution of like-minded people who share a common faith, tradition, and vision of worship, fellowship, service, etc. This like-mindedness and shared commitment is relatively easy to manage. The congregation establishes itself in a community, advertises its existence (sometimes merely with a notice board that gives service times), opens its doors, and waits for other like-minded Christians, or those who have a need and suspect that the congregation can help, or the curious, to come and join in. In a sense, ministry is perceived as something that can be done to those who have come; mission is perceived as issuing an invitation.

Fundamental to this model of the church is an understanding of the nature of community which pictures the congregation at the centre of a village. Both the village and the congregation are perceived as fairly static institutions. People grow up within the village and within the congregation. There may be a few families that move out or in, but there are always a majority that keep things stable. This high level of stability means that there is a high degree of "ownership" of and commitment to the institution.

Of course, in the LCA the majority of congregations in the cities have used this village model quite successfully in establishing themselves, even in urban growth areas where a small core of families commit themselves to developing a congregation that may provide security and comfort in ministry as they move into a new area. In the short term, small numbers and a shared vision make for a congregational institution that is easy to manage and control, where it is relatively easy to develop consensus, and where there exists an ideal combination of the security of the old mixed with the excitement of the new adventure. There is a strong sense of mission just in the process of establishing a new location—whether or not

significant numbers of new families are actually contacted in ministry. Even in a new location there is usually a transplanting of people and forms that provide the stability that makes the congregation feel comfortable and secure.

The reality of urban congregations these days is that although the congregational model is built on a sense of stability and continuity, the wider community is experiencing less and less stability and continuity. People are moving constantly. People are changing jobs constantly. People are even changing partners and families constantly! There is less and less commitment to identifying with a particular institution for a long period of time.

Instead, people experience community in shorter grabs and are forced to carry with them anything they value from their past communities, either by finding another community that allows them to hold on to what they have brought, or by developing a fairly personalized community of their own. (I suspect that some of the attraction of small-group ministry lies in this opportunity to create, even within a congregation, a higher level of stability and continuity.)

My experience of the Church active in schools has made the traditional congregational model seem grossly insufficient and inaccurate as a single representation of the nature of the corporate Church today. A community may not be easily and clearly defined as a Christian “church” or “congregational” community, and yet bear the hallmarks of the ministry of the Church. In a school, the initiative begins in offering ministry to the wider community—serving the common need of all families to educate, but linking that service with the specific proclamation and living out of the Gospel. The community may lack a common and consistent level of faith commitment among all who are part of the community and is more likely to be dependent

on the common commitment of the community leadership (pastor/principal/teachers/other staff/some parents and children). Indeed, for many, the commitment of faith is likely to grow and develop within the community, rather than being brought into the community.

Contact with a school community is of course limited because students move up and out of such a community. It may be reasonable to suggest, however, that a family with three children, connected to a P-12 school, will experience a high level of involvement with the school community for about 17 years. This is possibly longer than any of the family members will ever commit to any other community institution!

The lack of a homogenous faith experience and understanding brings with it some real difficulties in maintaining any institutional form. One cannot simply draw on the collective faith and traditions of the past as the foundation for worship, authority, or even doctrine! These must be learned, if important, or even left aside, if unimportant. Increasingly, the Church can no longer assume anything about those with whom it has contact in Australian society.

And I believe that many in the Australian community want to learn what the Bible says about them—even if they don't yet know that they want to learn this! They want to know that they

- exist, not as the end-product of chaos but by benevolent design;
- exist with purpose;
- live in a world which is good, and to be celebrated;
- are loved;
- are empowered to love others and make meaningful contributions to the lives of others;
- can make big mistakes and be forgiven;

- are created for an eternal, not fleeting, existence;
- belong!

The Church can no longer expect that, simply by building a church, advertising Sunday services, and welcoming anyone who comes along, they will eventually get a chance to teach these important things to the whole community. Rather, the Church has to go out into the community and teach this to people in the context of their everyday living. In years past, when the whole community was "Christian," the Church saw the separate activities of Sunday as informing the everyday activities of the week. Now we have to take the Sunday activities into the everyday activities if we want these to be informed!

What kind of activities will allow the Church to achieve this goal?

- Schools! What better place to teach than in institutions set up to teach, and to practice what is taught in community!
- Tertiary chaplaincy. At the point where young people are engaged in moving from home dependency to independence, we need to have pastors/lay-chaplains walking with them!
- Hospital chaplaincy. The Church has to move to people in crisis, not expect them to move to us.
- Aged care. Not because there is a captive audience but because a focused community, access, and time suggest real ministry possibilities.
- Industrial chaplaincy. If, as a pastor, you live and work alongside people in any industry, you will have plenty of opportunity to proclaim, to teach, to care.
- Retail chaplaincy. I would love to see a pastor established, full-time, for a number of years, working with the staff of a shopping center.
- Welfare/employment/counseling Service. These are still

places where people will “come in.”

- Cyber Church? It is probably too early to say, but within a few years use of the ‘www’ may well present one of the most durable opportunities for maintaining pastoral relationships.

Many other activities might be included in this list. The thing about all of them is that people do not have to make a conscious and deliberate decision to find the church, but can be given the opportunity to discover that the Church is interested and involved in the life of the world.

Pastor Mark Greenethaner (29 January 2004)

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## Football Theology

Colleagues,

Call me un-American. I’ve never been enthralled by U.S.-style football, and the older I get the more my interest in it, such as it ever was, continues to fade. So when I joined the mass of the citizenry in attending to the super-doings two Sundays ago it was mainly to check out this year’s crop of million-dollar commercials and to see if the half-time show would establish yet another benchmark of garishness and excess. I do believe it did. Parenthetically, if one of you out there is adept at reading the message in the medium and can clue the rest of us in to the operative dogmas that formed and drove Madonna’s Big Show, we’d love to hear from you.

For now we get to hear from someone who watched on Super Bowl night to see the football. Well, of course he did. Dr. Peter

Keyel, a member of the Crossings Board, grew up in Racine, Wisconsin where no red-blooded boy could avoid following Brett Favre and the Packers, or so I imagine. Today he lives in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, home to a host of rabid folk who are strangely fixated on my town's least favorite team, the Steelers. (I live in Cleveland.) Last year, as Peter watched the Packers beat the Steelers in Super Bowl XLV, he fell to thinking about theology. An immunologist by training and profession, he had nonetheless come down with a serious case of the Law/Gospel bug through conversations with Ed Schroeder, who he went to church with while completing post-doctoral work at Washington University in St. Louis.

That's how it came to pass that Peter found himself watching last year's big game and the frenetic hoopla surrounding it through the eyes of a thoughtful, confessional Lutheran layperson. The results are below, with some minor edits to synch his reflection with the new realities of Super Bowl XLVI. Enjoy. Could be, by the way, that the preachers who read this will come away a fresh idea or two on how to pitch the two-edged Word of God in terms that will spark a fresh "Aha" in the folks they're talking to. If so, God be praised.

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

P.S. No sooner had I finished this than Peter sent me a note about what he's up to these days. Here it is:

"I am working as a postdoc at the University of Pittsburgh, in the field of Immunology. I'm trying to figure out how one of the early-warning systems the body has against infectious diseases works. This system is called the "inflammasome" because it promotes inflammation. Knowing how it works will ultimately help us design better vaccines and cure diseases resulting from too



much inflammation, like arthritis.”

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Americans, at least those who like football, have a grasp on Christian theology.

Wait, what?

Look at the language we use for football. Where I live we have signs up announcing that you're entering "Steeler country", because WE live here, not any actual Steelers. We talk about how we need to beat team X and team Y so we can move on and make it to the Super Bowl. It's our team, even though we don't manage the team or pick the players. We know that our place is in the bleachers, as fans, and that we don't contribute to the team winning. Even so, when the Giants won the big game this year, it was a win for everyone in the New York megalopolis. On the Tuesday after the game, people swarmed to watch the ticker-tape parade up the so-called Canyon of Heroes in Manhattan, where they reveled in a victory to which they contributed nothing. And most fans realize it would be completely ludicrous for them to expect victory or even avoid injury if they tried to play in place of the Giants, or the Steelers.

Americans get Christian theology, at least when it comes to football. So how does that work? Well, the hardest part for people in New England, the Bay Area, and Wisconsin to get is that Jesus is for us as the Giants were for New Yorkers a week and a half ago. He won the Super Bowl through absolutely no help from us, and that victory IS our victory.

Of course, there are some differences, since the Super Bowl Jesus wins for us is salvation from sin and death, instead of a seasonal sporting event, but we can still use the Super Bowl to better understand atonement theology and where we get the

theology end wrong. The biggest part we tend to get wrong is that we are the fans, not the football team. While we understand in football that our team stands no chance if we're the ones actually on the field, it's a lot harder when it comes to life and breaking the power of sin and death. We're not happy with how our team seems to be doing. We want to take to the field, and play this one. We need to be good enough, try hard enough, save enough, be holy enough, feed enough poor people, give enough to the church, and if we work hard enough, we can win. Yes we can. And yet, there are two problems here. One is that if the Bible is any indication of how well God's chosen people have played, then it's clear we've got a longer losing streak than the Pittsburgh Pirates'. Read it: all through the Old Testament, Israel has sinned, and turned away from God, over and over again. Even in the midst of God moving the Israelites to the Promised Land, they go and make themselves a Golden Calf. And today, we're not doing any better. Given the amount of exhortation to feed the poor, remember the widows and orphans, stick up for the exploited, we're still not noticeably closer to that goal. We can't field a winning team, and that's a problem.

Just in case that wasn't bad enough, there's actually worse news. If we're fielding a team ourselves, we're not playing on God's team. We're playing against God's team. I think we all know just how brutal that game would turn out. I've heard there's a 100% injury rate in the NFL, and that part of the analogy translates perfectly well. When we take to the field of salvation ourselves, we're playing against God, and it's going to destroy us. How much of our hurt comes directly from trying to play God, and win one for ourselves?

This is where we might need to leave the sports analogy. Christ's victory is not that he played a perfect game while walking the earth. His triumph over sin and death does not come through delivering the ultimate thrashing to every other team

against him. Instead, Jesus comes to our side and takes the place of Himself. He is destroyed—nailed to a cross to die a criminal—because He played for us against God’s team, which is named “The Law”. But that isn’t the end. God raises Jesus from the dead and declares him the victor. Moreover, that victory is ours, and not because we played a good game once we had Jesus as our coach or quarterback. That victory is ours the same way the Giants’ win is a win for every Giants fan. In trusting Jesus to take the field, we become fans. We’re back in the bleachers, where we belong. Even though we didn’t do anything to earn this victory, it is ours, given to us freely.

That also gives us a new perspective on our lives. We’re no longer playing to win the game, or save the world, or undo sin and death. That’s what Jesus has accomplished. We’re fans, celebrating and talking about our team—Jesus. Our sports jerseys and terrible towels are forgiveness of sins, love for our enemies, and providing for the less fortunate amongst us. Those are the team colors that we now wear, thanks to Christ. Like football fans, we talk up our team—God’s promises for us, and for everyone, regardless of which team they are currently playing on, because we trust that we have been chosen by the winning team. We also share the same solidarity football fans have, only on a grander scale. And in life, that solidarity is reaching out to our enemies, to the rival teams and fans, not to trash talk them, but to help them when they are in trouble, even at risk to ourselves.

So if you like football, you can do Christian theology.

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# Response to John Roth's "How to Disagree Well"

Disagreement within the Church is nothing new. About a month ago ([ThTheol #708](#)) we reprinted a five-minute election speech by the Rev. Dr. S. John Roth, who currently serves as bishop of the ELCA's Central/Southern Illinois Synod. In his speech, Roth discussed what it means to "disagree well." This week we return to that theme.

Our writer is Steve Albertin, who has been a member of the Sabbathology writing team since 2002. Steve was a student of Bob Bertram and Ed Schroeder in St. Louis. He received his M. Div. from Concordia Seminary in Exile in 1976, his S.T.M. in systematic theology from Christ Seminary-Seminex in 1978, and his D.Min. from the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago in 1995. Steve has served as pastor to congregations in Ft. Wayne and Indianapolis, and since 1998 he has been pastor at Christ Church, The Lutheran Church of Zionsville in Zionsville, Indiana. In the course of his ministry, he has written a number hymns and dramas for church worship, and he has authored and co-authored several collections of sermons, including *Against the Grain* (1999) and *Through Cross-Colored Glasses* (2003).

In today's Thursday Theology, Steve picks up where Bishop Roth left off, fleshing out the bones of what it means to disagree well, and getting to the heart of what this means for the Church in particular. We trust that you will find much to mull over as you read Steve's response to Bishop Roth. And, as always, we welcome you to send in your own responses if you have them.

Peace and Joy,  
Carol Braun, for the editorial team

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Conflict always has been and always will be a part of life in human organizations. The proliferation of conflict management strategies in the world of business management is a testimony to this reality. Organizations are hungry for processes that will help them manage their conflict constructively. A healthy organization that welcomes diversity and creativity will inevitably have disagreement and conflict. The question is not whether there will or will not be conflict. The question is HOW to manage conflict that inevitably arises, so that the organization can get better. It must learn to “disagree well.”

The Church is not immune from such conflict. From the pages of the New Testament to the Protestant Reformation, from the denominational battles of American Christianity to the church fights that split congregations, conflict is a constant in the church. For the Church too the question is HOW to manage conflict. It too must learn to “disagree well.”

Bishop John Roth’s speech leading up to his election as Bishop of the Central/Southern Illinois Synod of the ELCA, entitled “How To Disagree Well” (Thursday Theology #708), also reflects this reality. He recounts how conflict has been a part of his church life from the beginning of his ministry to his current post as Bishop. He laments the conflict because through those conflicts the church has not dealt with conflict effectively. It has not learned how to “disagree well.” As a result, “the fracturing continues.” Denominations continue to divide and mission suffers.

What does it mean to “disagree well?” The answer to that question ought to help an organization deal with its disagreements constructively so that it does not suffer the debilitating division that erodes its bottom line, wastes its resources, and inhibits its ability to carry out its mission.

What does this mean for the church? Some could interpret Bishop Roth's answer as nothing more than attempt to manage organizational conflict in order to protect the institutional bottom line from the corrosive effects of conflict and failing to "disagree well."

Unfortunately Bishop Roth's speech was limited to the confining restrictions of ELCA election procedure. He only had five minutes to make his point. However, in this short speech there is something quite amazing at work. The church can be and often is quite different from the secular world of business organizations when it comes to dealing with conflict.

"In, with, and under" the organizational side of the church and God's "left-handed" management of this all-too-human organization, God's "right-handed" redemption through Christ and His Spirit is also at work. The Church does not simply manage conflict but works to make Christ and His benefits known. That is evident in Bishop Roth's speech and his understanding of what it means to "disagree well." In the Church, to "disagree well" may only be a way to manage its conflict so as to protect its bottom line; however, to "disagree well" can also be the result of Christ's redeeming presence. God's "right-handed" management of the Church through Christ in the power of His Spirit can transform the survival impulses of church organization into the very means by which the Holy Spirit can connect people to Christ and His redemption.

That is not readily obvious in Bishop Roth's remarks. The three characteristics of disagreeing well cited by Bishop Roth are true for any healthy organization, church or otherwise:

1. Fairness
2. Intellectual integrity
3. Honest humility.

There is nothing uniquely “Christian” or even “churchly” when it comes to “disagreeing well.” The manager at the neighborhood McDonald’s, the foreman of the local plumbers’ union or president of the community’s school board will seek to deal with disagreement like this. However, “hidden” in Bishop Roth’s remarks there is evidence of a theologian of the cross at work, distinguishing Law and Gospel and “crossing” God’s action through Christ and His Gospel with God’s management of a bureaucratic human organization through the Law.

Through the application of the Crossings Law/Gospel hermeneutic to Bishop Roth’s remarks that will become evident. Those familiar with the Crossings Community have seen this hermeneutic applied to the interpretation of Scripture in the Weekly Lectionary studies (a.k.a., Sabbatheology) of Crossings. They are available (fifteen years’ worth!) at [www.crossings.org](http://www.crossings.org). The hermeneutic helps us to see God at work in the Scriptures ambidextrously through Law and Gospel. Here it will be applied not to Scripture but to Bishop Roth’s speech. In the process Christ will be magnified and His benefits offered.

## **Godly Disagreement**

Diagnosis: “Disagreeing Badly”

### **Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) – Bad Behavior**

The first symptom of conflict and disagreement is bad behavior by one or both of the conflicting parties. They do not treat each other fairly or justly. They may not even realize it. They bend the rules, break the Commandments, and righteously engage in all kinds of treachery because they are certain that God is on their side. With righteous indignation, they vilify and misrepresent their opponents in order “burn them in effigy.” Regardless of how inaccurate the characterization of their opponents might be, they are sure of their rightness. Even

though their opponent might insist that he has been misrepresented, the “other person [cannot recognize] that position as genuinely his/her position.” Accusations fly. No one listens to the other.

Religious wars are the worst sort of wars. They litter the landscape with “broken body parts” and mangled reputations. “All is fair in love and war.” Who cares about following the rules when all that matters is winning?

### **Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) – Bad Faith**

Their bad behavior betrays their bad faith. Their bad behavior is a kind of “Freudian slip” that reveals the secret of which they themselves might not be aware. They dare not admit it but they have little confidence in their own position. They are unwilling and unable to honestly listen to the criticism of their opponents and or consider the possibility that their critics might be right. They cannot “acknowledge where [their] own position is most vulnerable and where a contrasting position can make valid points.”

Such self-righteous insecurity betrays an even deeper malady. The very faith in the God they so zealously defend is cracking and crumbling. If they had the faith they claim to have, they would also have the patience to listen to another without always having to be on the attack. Afraid that their opponents might not be the danger they have portrayed them to be, they create caricatures and stereotypes of their opponents. The more uncertain they are of their faith, the more vigorously they misrepresent their opponents. Such “intellectual dishonesty” betrays their deep spiritual dishonesty. Despite their protests to the contrary, they do not trust God. Haunted by their bad faith, they can do no other.

### **Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) – Bad Fate**



The stakes are high. Such bad faith leads to a bad fate. Self-righteous arrogance prevents the “honest humility” that is necessary to disagree well. “I [cannot] acknowledge that as a fallen, flawed human being I myself may be wrong.” We refuse to face that fact that we are sinners dependent on God’s grace. Such stubborn hard-headedness and hard-heartedness puts us in a very untenable position: under the judgment of God. “Unless we learn how to disagree well, we will all end up losing.” The “we” Bishop Roth refers to is certainly more than our denomination. Failing to disagree well, failing to play fair, and failing to trust the promise of God in Christ will surely continue to jeopardize our organizational health. Numbers, members, and money will continue to dwindle. However, the danger is even greater. For such unfaithfulness we all face losing eternally as God hands us over to the deadly fate we have called down upon ourselves.

The conflict that afflicts churches is not merely between people. It is between people and God. This conflict we can never win. It can only end in our losing. No one ever wants to face that fate. The more we refuse to face our plight, the more God reminds us that there is no escape. THAT is living dangerously.  
Prognosis: “Disagreeing Well”

### **Step 1: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) – God’s Disagreement**

For as much as Bishop Roth’s prescription sounds like the usual conflict management that goes on in secular institutions, it is not. It is based on that fact that “God has reconciled us—all of us—to God’s self through Christ and has given us the ministry of reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:19).” The divine/human conflict was bound to make us all losers. However, God has resolved the conflict in Christ. Unlike the conflict resolution processes that institutional managers use to mask the real conflict that

rages beneath the surface, God in Christ has ended the conflict. Resolution of the divine/human conflict in Christ is the basis for all conflict resolution in the church.

God is determined that His grace and mercy will have the last word. Therefore, God in Christ chooses to disagree with His own judgment and reconciles Himself to us through Christ and His cross. Roth acknowledges that reality. “As sinners dependent upon God’s grace,” hard-headed and hard-hearted sinners are forgiven. “We sinners are reconciled to God and to one another by God’s grace through Christ Jesus—a gift, purely a gift.”

Any reconciliation, managing of conflict, or learning to disagree well begins here. No amount a conflict-management strategizing, focus-group deliberating, congregational surveying, or annual voters’ meeting will be able to end to this fundamental conflict. The harder we try, the more we fail. God is the only one who can only resolve the conflict from which we can never seem to escape. The conflict is resolved in Christ and can only be received as a gift from Him.

The offer of that gift is the glue that holds the church together. Without the proclamation of Christ, the fundamental problem remains. No conflict-resolution process or learning “how to disagree well” can ever deliver us from this dilemma. Only God can. The good news is that God has and continues to do so through the Word and Sacrament ministry of the Church.

## **Step 2: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) – We Agree...**

“Hope is strong” for Bishop Roth. That is a statement of his faith and trust in the reconciliation God has achieved in Christ. That faith is shared by many in the church he currently serves. Despite that church’s never ending battle with its own sin and unfaith and God’s judgment, there are many who share Roth’s faith in the Gospel: “We all came together in the ELCA

for good reason: we were joyfully united by our trust that we sinners are reconciled to God and to one another by God's grace through Christ..."

When Christ is proclaimed and His comfort is offered, faith happens. Christ is "enjoyed." The uncertainty is resolved. The insecurity is ended. We are at peace. We now take the time and have the patience to work at disagreeing well.

### **Step 3: Final Prognosis (External Solution) – To Disagree Well**

When sinners can count on Christ, it is possible in the midst of disagreement to have "honest humility." We can do what previously without Christ was impossible. We "acknowledge that as a fallen, flawed human being [we] may be wrong." In repentance and faith we agree with God's assessment of us. We do not have to defend ourselves and always be right. Because our righteousness is in Christ, we can disagree with our opponents with "intellectual integrity." We can patiently "recognize and acknowledge where [our] own position is most vulnerable and where a contrasting position makes valid points" because our being right lies in Christ and not in ourselves.

A new reality begins to exist. It is not so much a skill to be developed as it is a gift to be enjoyed. Connected to Christ, confident in the grace of God, we find ourselves disagreeing well. We reflect the three characteristics of disagreeing well that Roth describes in his speech.

Unafraid, we GET TO listen patiently to those with whom we disagree. We can behave better and play more fairly. There is no need to caricature and distort the position of our opponents. We "can state the position of the person [we] are disputing with accurately enough that the other person recognizes that position as genuinely his/her position."

The church may find itself looking a lot like the healthy organization idealized by the secular world's conflict-resolution experts. Even when the church is connected to Christ, disagreements will not disappear. Until our last day we will remain conflicted as sinners and saints. However, now, because Christ is in the mix, we may find ourselves "disagreeing well." Those who disagree are no longer so interested in winning as they are in serving the cause of Christ and the mission of His Church. That may mean they are wrong. That may mean swallowing their pride. That may mean suffering and sacrifice. That may mean asking for forgiveness. That may mean turning the other cheek and loving those who wanted you removed from the church. That may even mean suffering through some bureaucratic conflict-resolution process imposed by church leaders. But in the end, it is all worth it. With Christ and His benefits at the center, we can learn to disagree well.

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In the Thursday Theology pipeline—

February 16: Peter Keyel on "Football Theology"

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## **Mission in Mark, Part 3**

Colleagues,

This week's Thursday Theology brings the third and final installment of "Mission in Mark" by Pastor Paul Jaster (Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Elyria, Ohio). In it, Paul walks us through the rest of Holy Week in Mark's gospel, from the "riddles" and parables of Holy Tuesday through terror and amazement of the

women at the tomb on Easter morning, and finally to the recognition that the story of Mark's gospel is not over, because we keep writing it every day through our own acts of ministry. Paul continues to shed interesting light on the role of mission in Mark—for example, highlighting the gospel's call to continue Jesus' mission out in the villages of Syria and Galilee, rather than staying walled up in the separatist confines of the temple in Jerusalem. We hope and pray that Paul's writing will help focus your own thinking on our theme of mission during this Epiphany season.

Speaking of mission, you may recall that, some months ago in this space, Ed Schroeder published a review of *Through Their Eyes*, a book by Dean Lueking about Lutherans around the world ([ThTheol #688](#)). Dean wrote to us recently to offer Thursday Theology readers a special discount on his book: \$20/copy, shipping included (list price: \$25), with an even lower cost of \$15/copy for orders of 12 by pastors wanting to share the book with their congregations. Interested readers should write to deanATdeanluekingDOTcom.

Peace and Joy,  
Carol Braun, for the editorial team

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### Holy Tuesday:

Last day in the temple. Longest discourse. Six aggressive “royal riddles.” Royal because they strongly hint at Jesus' rightful kingship/lordship/sonship. Riddles because they do not say it 100% explicitly.

Riddle #1: For chief priests, the scribes and elders. The baptism of John the Baptist—did it come from heaven or was it of human origin? The right answer: The baptism of John the Baptist comes from heaven and so does Jesus.

Riddle #2: Parable of the Wicked Tenants. And “they realized that he told the parable against them!” Roman occupation led to new farm techniques and new debt laws. Small ancestral farms were becoming large estates in Judea and Galilee. Many became tenants on their own land to absentee landlords—some of whom were the wealthy priestly families in Jerusalem cooperating with the Romans and managing the temple. Twice Josephus tells of slaves of the high priests (thugs similar to those who will arrest Jesus) coming and forcibly removing tithes from the threshing floor which then causes poorer village priests to starve (Ant. XX, viii, 8; ix,2). And so it is no accident that, during the revolt in ad 66, the first act of the rebels once they seized control of the upper city was to burn the public archives in the temple where the records of debt were kept. High priestly families were major owners of that debt. One Dead Sea scroll speaks of the aristocratic “priests of Jerusalem who will amass for themselves wealth and gain by plundering people” (1QpHab 2:8). And lower priests allied with the Zealot party to seize control of the temple and its cult from the high priestly families collaborating with Rome.

This parable captured the social situation to a tee. Aristocratic priestly families were also literally “violent robbers” (lestes) hiding in their “safe house” (the temple), because they (a) robbed and exploited the poor by their tithes, (b) sent thugs to enforce the payments of tithes to the point of letting poor, rural priests starve, (c) preyed upon debt and confiscated ancestral farms in violation of the Torah’s mandate to loan to fellow Jews when needed and not charge interest, (d) created an oppressive situation by their collaboration with the Romans that caused zealous “freedom fighters” in response to use the temple as a place and platform to plot their revolts, especially during the festival of Passover, e.g. Barabbas, (e) devoured the homes of widows, while at the same time showing off

with prayers and seeking places of privilege, and (f) coercively took advantage of the very ones they were sent to serve. As a consequence, as the prophets said, the temple would be destroyed and given to another. Jesus warns that the stone/son [a Hebrew wordplay] that the builders rejected would become the cornerstone. The crucified Jesus, God's son (ben), replaces the temple, made of huge and magnificent stones (eben), as the center of the true worship of God, the place where God manifests his presence.

Riddle #3: A trap set by the Pharisees and Herodians. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not? Jesus' famous answer is "Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." But what does Jesus mean by that? This one sentence can be taken at least four different ways!

(1) It can mean "Pay the tax; God rules through the Caesar." A Herodian would say that, and the Sadducees. Paul. Josephus. Luke. Luther. (2) Or, it can mean "The money is idolatrous (a graven image and unclean); pay it and get that damn stuff out of here!" Some Pharisees would say that. Maybe some Essenes too. (3) Or is Jesus quoting Mattathias, the one who starts the Maccabean revolt, whose last dying words are "Pay back the gentiles in full, and obey the commands of the law" (1 Macc. 2:68)? In other words, "Give to Caesar Caesar's—namely, a sword." Like a zealot or the zealous would say. (4) Or, is Jesus really messing with their heads and saying, "Everything is God's, including Caesar, too. Caesar, the great Roman emperor, is only a tenant, who must one day also give account to God." Bottom line: Jesus says something to which everyone could agree AND by which everyone could equally be offended.

Riddle #4: For Sadducees, "who say there is no resurrection," and so they create an absurd scenario with a woman who had seven

husbands and ask, "In the resurrection whose wife will she be?" Answer: No one's, for there isn't any marriage in the resurrection. And this only goes to show that "you know neither the scriptures nor the power of God," for God "is God not of the dead, but of the living," as the book of Moses clearly implies (and as the resurrection of Jesus will soon prove).

Riddle #5: A sympathetic scribe: "Which commandment is the first of all?" Answer: The Shema, "Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, strength" and "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." Except, Jesus redefines "who" the neighbor is. Not just the tribe or clan, but everyone.

Implicit in Jesus' response is a criticism: When Israel engages in violent separatism, Israel violates its own most basic confession—that God is one. If God is one, then we all are God's children—equally. We are all of the same tribe.

Just think what it would mean if the three great monotheistic religions took the words of Jesus to heart. We violate our own most basic creed, when we fight with one another. More wars have probably been caused by monotheism than by anything else. Religion kills. And yet religious wars are the most fundamental violation of our very faith. God is one.

Riddle #6: For the crowd. "How can the scribes say that the Messiah is the son of David" when "David himself, by the Holy Spirit,...calls him Lord?" Answer: Jesus, son of David, is also Jesus, Son of God and son of man (a heavenly figure, à la Daniel 7), and therefore David's superior. Jesus' opposition to the violent abuses of a state-run, aristocratic temple is the very reason Mark's Jesus downplays Jesus as the Davidic messiah (one who forcefully centralizes his power via the temple) and in its place uses the superior and nonviolent son-of-man figure of



Daniel 7, the Human One (a truly humane ruler rather than a “beastly” one) who has a superior authority (Myers, 63). It also explains the “Messianic Secret” in Mark. Jesus is not saying to his disciples, “You have it right, but keep it a secret,” but rather “You have it wrong, so shut up!” (Crossan).

The riddles end with Jesus’ denunciation of the scribes who want places of high honor and yet devour the houses of widows—widows like the poor widow who was conned by the temple rhetoric to put into the offering the very last two pennies that she had.

Mark 13 is often called the “Little Apocalypse.” From the Mount of Olives “opposite the temple” (both physically and polemically), Jesus predicts in apocalyptic terms what will happen if the violent separatists continue on the path they are on and try to revolt against Rome. And yet, this passage is actually “anti-apocalyptic.” For Jesus is insisting that the destruction of the temple is NOT the end of the world nor the loss of God’s presence or existence. Rather it is only the end of a corrupt, imperial state temple system that has brought divine judgment upon itself by its neglect of social justice.

And it doesn’t take a divine prophet to foresee the destruction. As a boy Jesus saw what happened at Sepphoris [SEF-uh-ris, Zipori] just three miles from Nazareth, when Judas the Galilean led a tax revolt against Rome in 4 bc, the year of King Herod’s death. The Roman legate in Syria marched in with a legion, burned down the town, and marched out with slaves. Don’t we also often sense we are headed to disaster of apocalyptic proportions due to the mistaken actions of the zealous right or left? And yet, the good news of advent, the Son of Man comes with great power and glory. And so, learn the lesson of the fig tree and know that he is near.

This chapter gives clues to Mark’s community: A community

directly affected by the Jew revolt in Palestine (ad 66-70). The impending (or recently accomplished) destruction of the temple does not mean the end of the age and Christ's return, as some surmised. Followers of Jesus should pray and flee from the temple, rather than to it as a place of refuge, like the freedom fighters did. They should be suspicious of prophets who deliver new messages in the name of the risen Lord. The gospel may be written for Christian house churches in Galilee or Syria who are distancing themselves from the disciples headquartered in Jerusalem. Their role in the great revolt is not to hole up in the temple and fight like the zealots did, but rather to continue the compassionate and inclusive mission of Jesus in the villages of Syria or Galilee.

Mark deliberately departs from the traditional apocalyptic form in order to correct the twin errors of his contemporaries. Mark's focus on the cross set him against those who used apocalyptic symbols to legitimate a "holy war" against their enemies. And by anchoring his story of discipleship in the lived world of his audience, he stood against those who used heavenly visions to legitimate withdrawal from political struggle into gnostic communities (Myers, 104).

#### Holy Wednesday:

Jesus is lavishly drenched by an unnamed woman in oil and thereby anointed for burial. In Mark's gospel, besides the angels in the wilderness, it is only women (not the male disciples) who "serve" Jesus and who follow Jesus all the way to the cross.

#### Maundy Thursday:

Passover continues the exodus themes. The lamb sacrificed for Passover was not for the forgiveness of sins, but was food for a journey out of bondage into freedom.

At the Mount of Olives, Jesus says, "You will all become deserters; for it is written I [God] will strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered. But after I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee" (Mark 14:27-28). God is the one who ultimately allows or causes Jesus to die, but will also raise him; Galilee, not Jerusalem is the place of post-resurrection mission. "What takes place is both foretold in Scripture and accepted in obedience by Jesus" (Hooker, 344).

Jesus to the temple guard, "Have you come out with swords and clubs to arrest me as though I were a bandit [lestes, terrorist, violent separatist]?" (Mark 14:46). They are the ones acting like and for bandits, and here they come out after Jesus like he is one.

"The allusions to Zechariah 9-14 in Mark 14:22-28, then, may well be read by Mark and his audience in such a way that they provide a contrast to the interpretation of those passages circulating in Jewish revolutionary circles known to them. Instead of seeing the arrival of the kingdom of God in the appearance of a triumphant Messiah figure on the Mount of Olives, a miraculous deliverance from Jerusalem from the Gentile armies that surround it, and a resanctification of the Temple through its cleansing from pagan influence, Mark would see the arrival of the kingdom of God, paradoxically, in the deliverance of Jesus to his Jewish enemies on the Mount of Olives, his humiliating death at the hands of Gentiles in Jerusalem, and the proleptic act of Temple destruction that accompanies that death" (Joel Marcus, *The Way of the Lord*, 161).

#### Good Friday:

The charge against Jesus is based on his threat against the temple. Jesus is asked point blank, "Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?" No riddles now. And Jesus says, "I am," and identifies himself as the son of man of Daniel 7, who acts

on earth with the full authority of God. Jesus claims a status even higher (!) than the high priest asked about. Jesus identifies himself as the "Son of Man" of Daniel 7, a "heavenly figure" and final judge, which includes being judge over the very high priest and temple authorities who are judging him.

As a result the charge is "blasphemy," the verdict "guilty" and the sentence "death" (which should be by stoning). And justly! The priestly council is acting on good authority—God's own. This is God's word against God's word again. Jesus' claim "I am the Son of God" vs. the Torah's insistence that to take God's name in vain is blasphemy. It is religion that is killing Jesus. God's word of law. A law that says that sinners must die. Religion kills.

But, of course, the Romans are in charge, and the temple leadership needs to cooperate and collaborate with the Romans. The charge is changed from blasphemy to treason, that is, Jesus' royal claims. However, even in the temple action, Jesus is a threat to Rome because the Romans took the sanctity of all temples seriously, not least because sacrifices for the emperor were offered in them. To the Roman, desecration of a temple was seen as a capital offense (Witherington, 314). So, Jesus is put to death by crucifixion, the most violent separation of them all—by both the highest religious and the highest civil God-given authorities of the time—IF you are talking about the law, that "lording it over" kind of authority.

Jesus is mocked as king, and the public inscription of the charge against him is "The King of the Jews," which is ironic because Jesus IS the king of the Jews and our king too. Jesus lets out a loud cry, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Our cry so often. This is the very wonder of the cross. At this moment that Jesus is the farthest from God, God is the closest to us, where we are. We cannot explain it, only proclaim it.

Jesus gives out a loud cry and breathes his last (which Fred Danker insists is one last great cry of exorcism). The temple curtain is torn in two, from top to bottom: schizomenous again. The barrier between God and sinners is removed and it foreshadows the temple's destruction in ad 70. The Roman centurion in charge of the execution squad observes the way Jesus dies and is the first human to identify Jesus correctly: "Truly this man was God's Son," thus foreshadowing the faith of the gentiles who respond to the gospel of the crucified Christ.

### Mark 16: Easter

There is the Sabbath (Saturday). And then very early on the first day of the week (the eighth day, the first day of new creation) when the sun/son had risen, the women go to the tomb and are greeted by a young man, dressed in white (a heavenly figure) who says, "Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. But go, tell his disciples AND Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee [the place of positive ministry]); there you will see him, just as he told you." This is the last spoken word in Mark. God's last word. The final verdict of the Ultimate Judge on Jesus and those whom Jesus befriends and who follow the risen Christ to where he is—active in ministry/service.

"So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to no one [a double negative!], for they were amazed."

And of course, as you know, the best manuscripts stop here at verse 8. And the other verses are obviously scribal attempts to correct the problem.

### Two Final Observations – Observation One

John Dominic Crossan has a marvelous quote: "To say that a dead man rises says something about our mortality. But to say that a

crucified man rises from the dead says something about the system that put him to death.”

By that Crossan means the imperial system. The resurrection of Jesus is a challenge to empire. And clearly, Crossan has America’s own empire-building in his scope. America is the greatest post-industrial empire, he claims, just as Rome was the greatest pre-industrial empire. Only America is an empire of bases rather than one of nations.

But, Luther’s great insight (shared and echoed by Crossan) is that that the system that puts Jesus to death is also God’s system, witnessed to in the Scriptures. And so ultimately it is one word of God vs. another word of God. One kind of authority against another kind of authority. Law vs. Gospel. And those are two very different, contradictory words. Two very different kinds of authority, both from God. And it is very critical which one of those two words has the last word: the ultimate say. Because one way the blame falls on us and anyone who challenges the system. The other way the blame falls on Christ (the Servant–God’s ransom–God’s freeing event) and away from those whom Christ befriends and reclaims. For that is what ransoms do, they free people.

Law and Gospel are based on two very different authorities that are oppositional to one another. One is a “lording over” which always leads to tyranny and oppression even when done in the best of circumstances in the name of God. Religion kills. The other is a “lifting up” which always leads to love. And when tied into God’s love for us in Christ, it is more powerful than anything else. It makes us alive together with all others. And it gives us that name which is greater than son or daughter: the name of servant/minister.

Observation Two – This story has no ending

This story has no ending, because it is still ongoing. The end has not been written yet. Every reader is challenged to continue the story in his or her own time. And so the questions are—

*Will we see?*

*Will we hear the message of good news?*

*Will we believe Jesus is who Jesus says he is and live accordingly?*

*Will we engage in positive ministry? That ministry around the lake? Bridging violent, antagonistic cultures? Despite the resistance?*

*Will we see that God is one and that if we do not recognize all as our neighbors (part of the same tribe) then it violates our most fundamental creed?*

*Are we alert to apocalyptic disasters that our violent actions to rule over others bring upon ourselves as part of God's own righteous judgment?*

*Will we resist the temptation to institutionalize and instead move on? Always move on?*

*Will we speak up? Or will we say nothing to no one because we are afraid?*

The story doesn't end because it is continuing to be written in our own time. So, blessings as you continue to write the story in your own preaching this year. The year of Mark.

### **A Partial List of Resources for Mark**

- Crossan, John Dominic. God and Empire: Jesus Against Rome, Then and Now. HarperOne, 2007.
- Hooker, Morna. The Gospel According to Mark. Hendrickson, 1991.
- Marcus, Joel. Way of the Lord. New York: T&T Clark, 2004.
- Myers, Ched. Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1988.

- Witherington, Ben. The Gospel of Mark: A Socio-rhetorical Commentary. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2001.
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In the Thursday Theology pipeline—

February 9: Steve Albertin responds to John Roth's "How to Disagree Well"

February 16: A wrap-up report on the Fourth International Crossings Conference