

Can One “Preach” the Law? An Interchange, Part 1

Colleagues,

Now that Christmas sermons have been filed in whatever repository preachers may use for such things, we may as well return to a theme we’ve touched on more than once over the past year or two, namely the nature of the preacher’s task, craft, and calling.

A couple of months ago I stumbled across a page on the *Lutheran Quarterly* website entitled “[Law-Gospel Preaching](#),” and quickly sent news of it around to the folks who organize the work that Crossings does. Those of us with passions for important things—the proper distinction between God’s Law and God’s Gospel, for example—tend to talk among ourselves too much, taking too little note of things being said and thought by folks in other circles who also care about these things. It also seems to me that we succumb too easily to the hubris of Elijah, who assumes that “I alone am left” to tell it like it is where the Word of God is concerned (cf. 1 Ki. 19:14). We never are the only ones out there, of course, and to think otherwise is not only an insult to saints and colleagues unknown; it’s also a sin against the Lord who has promised always to feed his flock and provide for his Church. But for our sakes too the Savior Christ was born. Thanks be to God for that, and with all our hearts.

In any case, it’s a joy to discover (or re-discover) how well the good fight is being fought in other quarters, the *Quarterly*’s among them, and so I sent the word along. Wouldn’t you know, it sparked a quick interchange with enough meat to it that you’ll find it of interest, I think. I’ve edited it down to a back-and-forth between Ed Schroeder and one of the

newer members of the Crossings Board, the Rev. Dr. Martin Lohrmann, whose PhD specialty is Reformation history. Ed raises the intriguing question—you haven't thought about it either, I'll bet—of whether it's legitimate to speak of Law-Gospel “preaching,” particularly where God's Law is concerned. Martin fails to be persuaded that this is something to worry about. That shouldn't be altogether surprising. Martin, pastor of Christ Ascension Lutheran Church in Philadelphia, serves also on *Lutheran Quarterly's* editorial staff as webmaster. With this as intro, read on.

By the way, since this turned into a fairly long discussion, five or six pages worth, we'll feed it to you in two parts, round two coming at you next week. Also: for the sake of readers who might be mystified by certain abbreviations here and there, we've added explanations in square brackets.

On another note, some months ago I passed along news about the death of Edna Braun, steadfast saint and grandmother of Carol Braun, my Thursday Theology co-editor. Edna's husband Norman fell asleep in the Lord just after Christmas. In the mystery of the kingdom, his faith too is blessing all of us through the work his granddaughter does on our behalf. Commend him with thanksgiving to the Light the darkness cannot overcome.

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

The Schroeder/Lohrmann interchange on the term “Law-Gospel preaching”—

From Ed Schroeder—

Before adopting the rhetoric of *Lutheran Quarterly* on “law and

gospel preaching”–

Caution #1 There is no word in the Greek New Testament (NT) for “preach” – Fred (BDAG) Danker. [BDAG = the definitive English lexicon of New Testament Greek, commonly identified by the names of the four scholars chiefly responsible for it, i.e. Bauer, Danker, Arndt, and Gingrich.]

Caution #2 When English translations of the NT do use “preach,” they are regularly seeking to render two NT Greek nouns that have been turned into verbs in the Greek text. The two nouns are Good-News (euaggelion) and Message (kerygma).

#3 These two nouns get used as verbs when NT texts seek to turn the noun into an action. “Good-news-ize” the folks with this specific good news, “message-ize” the folks with this explicit message. English translators have regularly rendered this as “preach the Good News,” which Danker always caveated as damaging the meaning of the two original nouns.

#4 The NT Greek noun “nomos” [law] is NEVER turned into a verb in the NT. Never ever. So there is no NT precedent to create the expression “preach the Law”... which is already a distorting of the original meaning of the noun itself.

#5 Bob Bertram’s choice of Diagnosis and Prognosis for the rhetoric of Crossings was a clear departure from this. Especially his use of diagnosis for “doing” NOMOS. The medical metaphor signals what Law is. God’s diagnosis of our malady. A medical doctor never “preaches” diagnosis. She simply is descriptive. “Here is what the data reveal. You are sick. These are the specs of your malady. I’m not ‘preaching’ this to you. I’m describing your psychosomatic landscape in the same way that I would describe what I see when I look out the living room window of our home toward the flowers in the backyard.”

#6 The M.D. DOES get proclamatory when she moves on to therapy. (Bob Bertram's "prognosis" in the Crossings paradigm. De facto a "new" prognosis, because the earlier diagnosis did bring with it its own prognosis: "If no intervention, death.") The M.D. says: "Here is a medication/a therapy that can help. Here's how you use it. Do what I'm telling you. This is the way to good health in your specific case." That is proclamatory. Good-news-izing the patient. With both indicative sentences and admonition sentences. Indicatives and imperatives. But none of this proclamation is "nomos." Even the prognosis-imperatives are good-news-imperatives for the patient.

If LQ wants to stick with this inappropriate terminology—allegedly Lutheran—let them. But the Crossings tradition has another option.

Ed

Response from Martin Lohrmann—

Remembering the apostle's advice in 2 Timothy "to avoid wrangling over words," here are some simple reasons I find "law and gospel preaching" to be a fine expression.

I'll begin with my own sly objection to the phrase "law and gospel preaching": it seems to be redundant. The word of God is always doing the twin work of law and gospel, killing the old Adam and making alive. In theory (at least in Lutheran circles), all sermons should be about letting the Word do this work. But since not all sermons or preachers are keen on doing that, the "law and gospel" part of the phrase is an adjectival way to remind preachers what Word they are proclaiming in their sermons.

I'm not worried about the word 'preaching', either. The Word is doing its twofold work whether we're reading the scriptures,

engaged in mutual conversation with other Christians, sharing the word with non-Christians, singing hymns, praying prayers, preaching sermons, and on and on. 'Preaching', then, is one word among many that we use to talk about those activities in which the Word of God is at work among us. That said, the Spirit is (*deo volente*) also doing some kerygma work through our sermons, which is the specific focus of the "law and gospel preaching" feature under discussion.

Regarding the use of this concept in the BC, I'm quite sure preaching falls under the rubric of "teaching the Gospel" and other similar phrases used to express the ministry of the Word in the Augsburg Confession (V, VII, XIV, etc). I would back this up by noting that Melanchthon uses that phrase this way in article XX when describing what "preachers" had been wrongly "teaching before now." If I recall, he goes into more detail about the preaching the one Word as law and gospel in the Apology, but my copy of the BC [Book of Concord] is in my office and I'm at home now. I clearly need another copy.

Second, it's worth recalling that the Large Catechism itself began as a sermon series. That is, Luther was preaching the salutary distinction between law and gospel from the pulpit as he made his way through the biblical content of the commandments, creed, Lord's Prayer and sacraments. This kerygmatic origin to the LC may even invite us to remember that the BC is itself no mere conveyer of static dogmas but a preacher and proclaimer of the Gospel to us over the centuries. In fact, that's my favorite way to read it. I love how it preaches Christ to me (as law and gospel) each time I open its pages.

Finally, FC V [Formula of Concord, Article V] discusses this topic quite clearly. While it doesn't limit the work of "law and gospel" to sermons, it certainly and explicitly includes the

public preaching and proclamation that happens in sermons in its discussion.

In summary, I thank Ed for the question and this chance to think about evangelical kerygma in a little more depth.

Martin

Campus Ministry

This week we bring you a short essay on campus ministry by the Rev. Dr. Steven C. Kuhl, current president of the Crossings board. Steve wrote this essay as a statement of purpose in a recent application for a Campus Ministry position at a Lutheran-affiliated liberal arts college. As he explained by e-mail, he is passing the statement along to Thursday Theology readers in order to spark our thinking about “the important role and opportunity” for such colleges in “ministering to those twentysomethings who exist on a continuum from being deeply faith-filled to being ‘nones.’”

Steve knows a lot about the spiritual needs of college students, having spent six years teaching theology (specifically, a course called “Faith Development”) at Cardinal Stritch University in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Of his college-aged students, he writes,

I’m convinced they are ready and open for a deep, spiritually oriented discussion of the meaning of life. But it takes creating a safe place—a trusting atmosphere—for that to happen. The classroom at a religiously affiliated college “forces” students into the topic as a required course. It is the job of the classroom teacher to transform what is “forced” into an

“unexpected opportunity” for the students to explore their “ultimate concern,” the meaning of life, their worldly placement “together with all that exists,” to borrow a phrase from Luther’s Small Catechism first article explanation of the Creed. I think that the campus pastor has a very important role to play in this regard also, along with faculty and staff. I’d welcome the Crossings readership’s thoughts on this as well.

Peace and Joy,
Carol Braun, for the editorial team

A Statement on the Role of Campus Ministry in a Lutheran-Affiliated Liberal Arts College

The Rev. Dr. Steven C. Kuhl

In many ways, the overall goal of campus ministry at a Lutheran-affiliated liberal arts college is no different from the goal of ministry in any other context. It seeks to relate the gospel of Jesus Christ to the give-and-take of people’s daily lives. What is distinctive about campus ministry is the particular context the minister works in or, better, the stage in life of the people amongst whom the minister works—namely, college students.

While it is true that no two people—including students—are alike, it is nonetheless generally true that all people—especially students—must pass through the same culturally and anthropologically defined stages of life. The typical student at a Lutheran-affiliated college is at that pivotal point in life of turning from adolescence to adulthood. That point in life is more than simply figuring out one’s career path and acquiring the knowledge and skills to be economically successful. It is more also than finding that one person to share one’s life with and raise a family. It is about beginning

to understand what can only be described as “the meaning of life.” Things like careers or finding a partner for life or raising a family, as wonderful as they are in themselves, get their richness only when they fit into a larger story called the meaning of life. That’s because our lives are not a universe unto themselves. They are part of a larger story or plotline, and only as we have some understanding of that larger story, called the meaning of life, will our lives have meaning and purpose—or, as the Lutheran tradition describes it, vocation or calling.

Because the meaning of life is ultimately religious in nature and theological in substance, campus ministry becomes one of the most important activities on a Lutheran-affiliated liberal arts campus. Campus ministry does not attend simply to one piece of the student’s development, but to the development of the person as a whole, as a person who lives his or her life as an integrated whole that includes the natural world, fellow human beings, and the God who calls it all into being. Campus ministry is about helping students to understand that they fit into the plotline of God’s creation, that they are not exempt from the problem of alienation and brokenness that has befallen this creation and that they are included in God’s promise in Christ Jesus to make all things new, in what Paul calls the “New Creation.”

In general, the specific tasks of campus ministry at a Lutheran-affiliated college are many and the approaches taken can vary greatly depending on the times and circumstances. But there are some basic ingredients: lively worship rooted in Word and Sacrament; stimulating conversation around the Word of God and daily life; critical exploration of the Lutheran theological tradition and its history of updating its confessional-grounded response to meet the needs of the time; pastoral sensibility and support for the unique struggles and challenges faced by

students, faculty, and staff in a modern college setting; regular engagement with the faculty and staff to provide an integrated experience of intellectual, social, emotional, and spiritual formation for students; and an open atmosphere that invites ecumenical and interfaith dialogue and that welcomes diverse points of view into the conversation.

Exploring the connection between one's relationship with God and the meaning of life can be easily overlooked in the college student's program of study. But also, sometimes, the facts, truths, and values that a liberal arts education gives can challenge and even contradict what students learned at home or in their local churches. For this reason and many others, campus ministry at a Lutheran-affiliated college has a vital pastoral and formational role to play in helping students integrate their liberal arts education with a deeper understanding of the Lutheran tradition that is mindful and informed about the ecumenical and interfaith context in which we live.

Advent Orts (on Mandela; the Promise; Francis and Joy; Justice; Certitude)

Colleagues,

Orts. In other words, bits of this, pieces of that. (In case you missed it, see the intro to [ThTheol 793](#).) The ones that constitute today's helping were lying in the path here and there as I stumbled through the week. They somehow caught my

attention. Perhaps they'll catch yours. There's a strong whiff of glorious Advent in each of them, or so it seems to me.

1. When I was in South Africa this summer Nelson Mandela was in the hospital and ailing badly. Already the nation had started to keen. As it happens he lingered—or, as faithful ones will say, the Lord kept him among us for a few months longer. At last came the call, and with it an outpouring of appreciation from the world he left behind. President Obama's remarks got the lion's share of attention this week, at least in the U.S. Yesterday we got pointed to [another tribute](#) that's just as eloquent (click on the link) and, even better, that comes from somebody who explicitly serves the Christ whose judgment all sinners await. I'm sure I'm not the only one of us who hadn't heard of [Peter Storey](#) until yesterday. I'm glad I know of him today, and you will be too when, clicking on the link, you discover among much else that he served for some months as Mandela's prison chaplain. My own takeaway from what he writes includes this thought, that God in his overflowing mercy will now and then give all the world a hint of that astonishing final judgment which indeed is on the way, the one that promises to leave leopards and lambs cuddling together while giggling babies play with rattlesnakes (Isaiah 11:6ff). A hint, I say. Nothing more, not yet, not now. The Nelson Mandela that Storey describes comes across as just such a hint, and a loud one too. He taught his fellow South Africans and others looking on that the sorting out of human iniquity doesn't *have* to equate with wrath and ruination for those deemed to deserve it. There are ways of slaking a vast thirst for righteousness that don't entail the guillotine or the gulag, other and far better ways of setting things broadly right, or at least improving them. Is that what the world

noticed earlier this week as it celebrated a rare and wondrous life? I hope so. Meanwhile, let those with a clue get busy and keep touting Christ, the rarest and best of them all, and the world's true hope.

2. Speaking of touting things, I saw somebody on Facebook's ELCA Clergy page (insiders only) wringing her hands over Advent and what to make of it. I sympathized. Time was when I did the same. Then, like lots of you, I read the lessons appointed for the season, the Old Testament ones in particular, and, with what I assume was a swift, hard kick by the Holy Spirit, was moved to start taking them seriously. What to make of Advent? My goodness, dear colleague, stand tall and preach the promises! And for God's sake—I say that seriously, not as an epithet—don't water them down by turning them into things that you or I or the human species in general will be able to effect in the day we get our wits together. Ain't gonna happen, any more than Sarai and Abram will be able, of themselves, to get her pregnant. Ah, but with God all things are possible, and on the Lord we wait. Nor will that waiting be in vain, as today's despairing smart set assumes it will be. What to do with Advent? Please, laugh aloud in reason's face. Then “get you up to a high mountain”—a middling pulpit, for that matter—and, upon planting a cross, “say to those who are of a fearful heart, ‘Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God. He will come and save you’” (Isa. 40:9a, 35:4). Advent: what a blast!
3. Some of you noticed just now that I was quoting the Isaiah text appointed for this Sunday, Advent's Third. For reasons as plain as the words of the text, it's also “Joy Sunday,” the day of the pink candle as the kids will see it, however much the purists may insist that its real color is “rose.” Joy—not grief, not consternation—is the true mood of Advent, and that's so no matter what the

preaching of John the Baptist might to do in untrained ears, especially when passed along through poorly trained mouths. If only the minds behind those mouths would recall that John, last in a series of astonishing prophets, is an advocate of joy: joy in the tidings that marvels long promised, not least the forgiveness of sins, are about to launch in earnest. Ergo joy. And if you want to get a handle this week on what God's joy is all about, you can't do better than to read the opening eight paragraphs of the new pope's first major teaching document, an "Apostolic Exhortation," as our Roman friends can't help but call it, the title of which is [Evangelii Gaudium](#), or in English, "The Joy of the Gospel." (Need I say it again? Click the link!) I haven't worked with care through the entire document yet, but really, those opening paragraphs are breathtaking. This week I had three Bible study groups read through them. Two were composed of folks as well-schooled and faithful as you can find in any church of an Augsburg persuasion. And in both the first reaction when the reading was done: "He sounds so Lutheran!" In fact what Francis does is to tell the Gospel, and to tell it exceedingly well, not only as a sharp theologian, but also as a profoundly wise pastor with an intuitive grasp of the *simul iustus et peccator* that baptized creatures happen to be. And to such as us he repeats God's Advent promises and offers Christ. Joy indeed! We could do a lot worse as Lutheran preachers this Sunday than simply to read those opening paragraphs from our pulpits and after that sit down.

4. A phrase I heard on the radio this week in a report about Army courts martial: "they dish out justice hard and cold," or something like that. It got me thinking yet again about the glibness of the "peace-and-justice" talk that seems in mainline circles to have thoroughly

supplanted the “evangelism” talk of yesteryear. Justice is the word that sticks most in my craw. Can we know it when we see it? And when we pray for it, can we want what we are asking for? Advent’s Fourth Sunday will trot us once again through the Magnificat, with its marvelous yet dreadful words. “He brings down the mighty from their thrones,” and “the rich he sends empty away.” That’s not just me, it’s my children too. So also with you and yours. But who of us will hear those words with the fear and trembling they demand? And how dare we ache for God’s justice, let alone pretend to peddle it, unless the justice we have clearly in mind is the unique and miraculous kind, not hard and cold but suffused with mercy, that makes its first appearance in the forgiveness of our sins? The only way to push this justice is to start by pushing Christ, God’s Justice-For-Us. But is that what our churches are doing? Our teachers and theologians, for that matter? If they were, evangelism would still hold sway as the Church’s first and compelling task. That’s evangelism as in trotting out “the good message”: “Unto you is born a Savior,” etc. For what it’s worth, Rome’s current bishop appears to get this evangelism/justice connection, and to get it vividly and clearly. See 3. above. Perhaps the time has come for a pope to teach the descendants of Wittenberg some lessons they’ve forgotten. Now that would a delicious twist, and thoroughly in keeping with God’s *modus operandi*. Again, see the Magnificat. As for “justice” as a word and topic to be explored, much more at some future date, I think.

5. Finally, we pass along a response to [last week’s post](#), Ed Schroeder’s review of Martin Riesebrodt’s *The Promise of Salvation*. It comes from Pr. James West, a retired Navy chaplain who is currently looking after a congregation in the San Diego area. Note the Advent-style joy he starts

with. Then look forward to his last paragraph, with its startling Advent ache. How could we not share that?

Peace and Joy,
Jerry Burce , for the editorial team

Pr. James West to Ed Schroeder—

1. Thank you for #803. Your words continue to liberate me from my servitude to the Deus Absconditus. Pure joy. Michael Novak's book, *Ascent of the Mountain – Flight of the Dove* was my gateway book to the realm of comparative religious studies. Having a last name beginning with W prevented my enrollment in the introductory studies class my freshman year. It was on the recommended reading list for precocious folk who wanted to read it during the summer before classes began. The mountain themes in the OT texts for Advent along with your book review brought clarity to that wee mountain named Zion to which all the nations stream. There is only one mountain that matters and it's easily missed when our sights are on those other purple mountain majesties.
2. My Love-Hate Relationship with Academic Study—Could it be our curved-in nature that inspires people to wrap themselves up in academic robes that keep out the chill of being proven wrong in matters concerning one's relationship to God? If one is “just” doing sociology, one is free to be brilliant, i.e., never wrong. One is “just” reporting the observable facts of human behavior. Woe be to one who not only stakes one's life on the God revealed to us in Christ Jesus crucified, but proclaims it in public in an academic journal as well as from a pulpit and the public square.

It happens in the congregation as well. I am working on equipping the members to visit the neighbors as members of a church seeking to learn what is on people's mind. At the congregational meeting, one member spoke up, "How many of you are willing to go out and do this? I just want you to know what you are agreeing to if you support this. I don't want to see this as setting us up for failure." I commend her honesty, don't say yes to something that you aren't willing to do. The anxiety beneath her statement is what if this doesn't work, where "work" is defined as "saving the congregation". A colleague has directed me to the literature on existential depression. At least it has a name. It sounds treatable.

My hate is directed toward the safety of the ivory tower, which isn't all that safe, and my love is directed to the academy that is able to call a thing what it really is. It is good to receive direction from the tower when in the midst of proclaiming the gospel to the believers, disbelievers, non-believers and those on the verge of believing because if it were true it would do. (St. Joseph (Sittler) of Chicago)

I'm waiting on the Lord to nail my desire for certitude on the cross. I wish that he would hurry up.

In Christ Jesus....

On Religions, Liturgies, Distinctions—and a Huge Difference. A Book Review

Colleagues,

Today we send you another gift from Ed Schroeder, this time a book review. We got it from him a few days ago. It follows nicely on last week's pitch for the Crossings conference at the end of January. The conference topic, you'll recall, will be pluralism and a Christ-confessor's response to that. Ed provides such a response here as he explores an intriguing argument by a sociologist of religion and unwitting theologian. Enjoy.

Jerry Burce,
for the editorial team

The Promise of Salvation: A Theory of Religion
Martin Riesebrodt (Author), Steven Rendell
(Translator). Univ. of Chicago Press. 2010.
Hardcover. 228 pp.

"Why has religion persisted across the course of human history? Secularists have predicted the end of faith for a long time, but religions continue to attract followers. Meanwhile, scholars of religion have expanded their field to such an extent that we lack a basic framework for making sense of the chaos of religious phenomena. To remedy this state of affairs, Martin Riesebrodt here undertakes a task that is at once simple and monumental: to define, understand, and explain religion as a universal concept.

“Instead of propounding abstract theories, Riesebrodt concentrates on the concrete realities of worship, examining religious holidays, conversion stories, prophetic visions, and life-cycle events. In analyzing these practices, his scope is appropriately broad, taking into consideration traditions in Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Daoism, and Shinto. Ultimately, Riesebrodt argues, all religions promise to avert misfortune, help their followers manage crises, and bring both temporal blessings and eternal salvation. And, as *The Promise of Salvation* makes clear through abundant empirical evidence, religion will not disappear as long as these promises continue to help people cope with life.”

So reads the PR blurb on [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com/dp/0819571400).

When I saw the title (no longer remember where), I wondered. Who is this guy? Where did he learn this Reformation arch-axiom, that salvation is trusting promises? Did he read Apology IV of the Augsburg Confession? He is, after all, a German and this book is a translation of his *CULTUS UND HEILVERSPRECHEN. EINE THEORIE DER RELIGIONEN* (2007). Could he have learned that in a German “Gymnasium”?

Now I’ve read the book and I still wonder. The author is a prof in the Divinity School at the U. of Chicago. So maybe his Lutheran colleague there, Martin Marty, clued him in. To find out I wrote to Marty.

Answer: “I hardly got to know MR, even though we were on the same faculty for years. He commuted to Germany (has a German artist wife), and hung out mainly with sociologists; I don’t think he had any interest in theology. [Concerning] that ‘promise’ book, I would be surprised to learn that it got close to theology.”

But if you’re doing sociology of religion, and writing a book on

the promise of salvation, how can you avoid “doing” theology? Theology of some sort?

That depends on what you understand to be the subject matter that theology works with. If you think theology’s subject for study is God, then you might think that in doing sociology of religion you are examining human data, as MR says, what people do “to avert misfortune, help...manage crises, and bring both temporary blessings and eternal salvation,” and so you are not doing god-stuff at all.

But our Crossings Ur-teacher, Robert Bertram, sought to instruct us otherwise. Look at the title of his doctoral dissertation (also at the Divinity School of the U. of Chicago. 1963. Paul Tillich and Jaroslav Pelikan his doctoral committee. Full text available on the Crossings website.) [“The Human Subject as the Object of Theology: Luther by Way of Barth.”](#) Short title: “How Luther’s Theology is about Man.”

For Luther’s theology (and St. Paul’s, St. John’s too?) is about people, people in their relationship to God. Culminating in the God-incarnate human Jesus of Nazareth. Yes, him and HIS relationship to God. Well, then, how can you escape doing theology when you’re examining people and the promises they trust to avert misfortune, manage crises, and attain both temporal blessings and eternal salvation?

But Marty is probably right in that MR doesn’t think he’s doing theology. Often in his book he says that’s a different discipline from the sociology of religion he is doing. And what he is doing is seeking to “save” religion, not only as a subject matter for academic study with a place at the university, but also to show that religion is human reality that really exists on the planet, and not an illusion.

For the so-called Enlightenment, still pervasive in Western

culture—and maybe now a global given—has been hard on religion. The so-called god-killers of the past two hundred years—Nietzsche, Freud, Marx, Feuerbach, to name a few—have claimed to show that religion is real only to those not yet enlightened by what, what all, human reason can achieve. The German term for the Enlightenment, the original term, is “Aufklärung.” It is less a metaphor for light than it is a term for clarity. Getting the fog to “clear up” so that you can indeed see the world for what it really is.

From such new clarity one can see, so said the Enlightenment’s gurus, that religion is largely unclarity about intellect (superstition, illusion about how things work), or unclarity about affect (Freud), or unclarity about ethics (Kant), or (à la Marx) unclarity about the economic structures that keep the elite on top and the religion-opiated peasants underfoot. Or even as super-high-tech neurologists now tell us: religious experience is “just” electrical waves dancing in a specific spot in our brains.

Now that we can finally see all this, they ask us, what’s left to be covered by the word ‘religion’? By the 21st century religion should have faded away. But it hasn’t. In fact, it’s booming all over the planet. How come?

MR’s answer to the religion-killers and to his sociology of religion colleagues, the ones who keep dabbling in items of intellect, affect, or ethics for the data of religion, is: You’ve been looking in the wrong place, the wrong “source materials” (87). Intellect, affect, ethics are in the mix in religion, but they are not its home base. The roots of religion are elsewhere. When it gets to intellect, affect, ethics, that’s already consequences, fruits nourished by these roots. So “back to the sources,” the data that are the primal data of religion, “concrete practiced religion.” And guess where that is.

Liturgy!!! Huh?

"Concentration on liturgy has far-reaching implications for the explanation of religion" (89). From the PR blurb: "The concrete realities of worship, religious holidays, conversion stories, prophetic visions, and life-cycle events." Better still, again in HR's own words: "My thesis [is] that religion is based on communication with superhuman powers and is concerned with warding off misfortune, coping with crises, and laying the foundation for salvation" (xii). Or again: "Religion is a complex of practices that are based on the premise of the existence of superhuman powers, either personal or impersonal, that are generally invisible" (74f.).

Religion is "practices," human actions. What people actually do when they are "doing" their religion. Yes, they do indeed reflect on and talk about these actions (intellect). And affect is all over the place. And they do behave in certain ways (ethics) because of these concrete practices of worship. Seems so simple. So obvious. Why didn't someone notice that before?

For nigh onto two hundred pages HR is arguing his thesis in dialogue and debate with the big names (past and present) in sociology of religion, some of whom I know of in my work-world over the years, some not. From my basically knothole spot peering into the sociology stadium I think he makes his case. Compellingly. Winsomely.

But is he doing theology too, even unwittingly? Even though he says he doesn't want to be doing so? Let's go back to Bertram's dissertation. Theology's turf is human data. So "people and the promises they trust to avert misfortune, manage crises, and attain both temporal blessings and eternal salvation" are theological data. But they are also HR's data for doing his discipline. What need have we of further witnesses?

But what we do have need of is further questions. Questions that HR doesn't ask. Doesn't ask, but should have asked, even as a sociologist. Precisely so, in view of his overarching procedural axiom for the scholarly work he is doing in this book. "All categories of thought are based on a perception of distinctions" (171).

Ah, distinctions! A primal Reformation term. And primal in HR's own discourse throughout the book as he engages his peers in constantly making distinctions where they often do not in order to make his point perfectly "clear."

Herewith some distinctions—both sociological AND theological—that are absent, but should not have been.

Distinction #1. Promises and promise-trusting.

A "perception of distinctions" is in order here. There are promises that are conditional and promises that are not. You've heard that drumbeat before on these pages. Law-promises and Gospel-promises are not the same sort of promise.

"Do this and thou shalt live. I promise." This is one kind of promise. It's conditional. It obligates me to fulfill the first two words.

"Young man, you'll be glad to hear this: Your sins are forgiven. I promise." This is not the same kind of promise. Here the obligations are on the promisor. No conditions at all for the promisee.

This distinction is fundamental to the different ways that promises work when trusted. For the former, promise-trusting is a never-ending hustle to keep fulfilling the condition. For the latter, promise-trusting is freedom. Freedom from the very hustle that the other promise inflicts in order "to avert misfortune, manage crises, and bring both temporal blessings and

eternal salvation.” When one trusts a Gospel-promise, the salvation agenda is a done deal. The sin-forgiver took care of that. Yes, the misfortunes/crises are still no piece of cake, but they are no ultimate nemeses. In no way do they require additional work to keep the promise trustworthy.

And this distinction leads to different liturgies. “Frequently, however, superhuman powers...have to be appeased by material or symbolic bribery in the form of sacrifices and vows, or neutralized by invoking opposing powers” (97). If that’s not communication with deus absconditus, what is? Which leads to the next distinction.

Distinction #2. Communication with superhuman powers.

A “perception of distinctions” is in order here. Namely, the distinction between “superhuman powers”—deus absconditus and deus revelatus. God veiled and God with the veil taken away in Christ. Communication with the former is eventually lethal. “It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.” Sinners turn into cinders in such communication. Au contraire communication with God “clothed” in Christ. Christ has taken the heat. He initiates the conversation. It’s always some variation on that overture, “Young man, you’ll be glad to hear this.” Instead of cinders it leads to singing. A very different liturgy from the “Dies irae” that always comes in the requiem mass at the end of the former liturgy.

Distinction #3. Salvation.

A “perception of distinctions” is in order here.

There is salvation and there is salvation. Some years ago S. Mark Heim did considerable fog-dissipation (Aufklärung) for missiologists with his book “Salvations: Truth and Difference in Religion.”

You can see it right away in the word “difference.” That means distinction. Heim shows the distinctions between the different kinds of salvation offered by different religions. Salvations are plural. Note the first word in the title of his book. And then: “Truth in Religion.”

“Truth in Religion” is that not all religions are guiding their devotees up the same mountain of salvation. Different religions offer different promises. [Remember the frequent references to “better promises” in the New Testament book of Hebrews, namely, Jesus’s priestly promise better than that of Levitical priests. Someone ought to do a study of world religions in terms of comparative promises.] There are different mountains of salvation in the world’s differing religions. Heim’s mantra is, “Nirvana is not the Kingdom of God.” When salvations are different, then the misfortunes and crises of daily life that challenge salvation may still be common to humankind, but their impact on folks climbing one salvation-mountain is likely to be different from what it is on another.

Summa: When one makes these distinctions, distinctions that (so it seems to me) MR’s own distinction-axiom requires, the conclusion is unavoidable: MR is doing theology. But not doing it well enough.

It’s human data, yes, human data common to both sociology and theology. But only half of the data, and not the better half. The data that MR works with never get beyond the data of human communication with deus absconditus, humans trusting law-promises, humans doing their liturgy “as foundation for [law]-salvation.”

If that is what religion is, then the Christian faith, people trusting Christ’s promise, is definitely not “religion.” Dare one call it liberation from religion?

So the liturgy of Christ-trusters must be something else. If their liturgy performance is not “laying the foundation for [their] salvation” (MR’s thesis), since that firm foundation is already a done deal, then what are they doing? And why? Could they just be doing it for the fun of it? Count it all joy? Also for the enjoyment of the “superhuman power” managing their salvation-mountain, from Genesis to Jesus to Judgment Day? Liturgy as doxology? What a concept! Nothing more, nothing less. No hidden additional agendas. Definitely not “laying the foundation for their salvation.” Just Hallelujahs.

Could MR do his next sociology of religion working with such Gospel-grounded liturgical data? Isn’t it just as empirical as the liturgical data he does analyze? Would you possibly have to be a Christ-truster to do it? Maybe MR is. He doesn’t say. Are there any such Christ-trusters doing this sort of sociology of religion anywhere nowadays? That’s a new thing I wonder about after reading his book.

Edward H. Schroeder
St. Louis MO
November 29, 2013

**“One for All and All in One”:
A pitch for your presence at
the forthcoming Crossings**

conference via some ruminating on Good Friday prayers.

Colleagues,

Let's start with the [conference](#). It happens next January in Belleville, Illinois, at the end of the month. For the fifth time since 2007 the Crossings Community will meet around a topic that cuts to the heart of our avocational calling as a band of drum-beaters for the proper distinction between God's Law and God's Gospel, and for the clarity of thought and proclamation that ensues from that. I say "avocational" because the people who sign off on our job descriptions haven't told us to beat those drums, and few if any of them expect us to do it. We beat them anyway—on the side, as time allows. It strikes us as pressing and important, especially when it comes to the matter of proclamation, the aim being, as prior conferences have underscored, that the Church's preaching and teaching should be infused with honesty: honesty about the Gospel and our need for it (2007), honesty about the God whose Gospel it is (2008), honesty about the mission the Gospel gives rise to (2010), and honesty about the word "disciple" and what that entails when the disciples in question are hearers of the Gospel (2012).

It suddenly strikes me that we'd do well to make God's Law the focus of a conference one of these years. Talk about a topic that we sinners who preach and teach in the Church are inclined to be dishonest about. Because of that the Gospel takes a beating. Pope Francis surprised the world by intimating as much in [the remarkable interview](#) that his fellow Jesuits published a couple of months ago. Here's a sample that didn't show up in the newspaper reports:

The church sometimes has locked itself up in small things, in

small-minded rules. The most important thing is the first proclamation: Jesus Christ has saved you. And the ministers of the church must be ministers of mercy above all. The confessor, for example, is always in danger of being either too much of a rigorist or too lax. Neither is merciful, because neither of them really takes responsibility for the person. The rigorist washes his hands so that he leaves it to the commandment. The loose minister washes his hands by simply saying, 'This is not a sin' or something like that.

The result (says Francis) is a loss of “the freshness and fragrance of the Gospel.” Now there’s a phrase to roll your tongue around and repeat with pleasure, or at least until it sinks in how frequently the Law’s misuse fills our own churches with a stale old stink. It’s a topic, like I say, that begs for focused, communal thought in a community that cares about such things. Who knows, in 2016, maybe?

Meanwhile 2014 beckons with a topic that’s equally urgent, and in some ways related. In a word, “pluralism.” More pointedly, how do fans of the good news of God in Jesus Christ respond to the plethora of accounts about God that don’t have the Christ of Trinitarian confession squarely in the picture? And still more sharply, what are the implications of that response for fellow human beings who cling to their Christ-less god or gods with tenacity and rigor, and in many cases with as much honesty as any band of sinners can hope to muster on their own, not excluding the band of sinning creatures that will cluster at our conference?

And all this is merely prelude to the genuine questions, genuine because they’re the ones that come into actual play as we rub elbows with other human beings. So, for example, how shall we love the “dear disbeliever”—thus Bob Bertram—with a love that

reflects and honors our Lord's surpassing love for her? How shall we pray for him? What gifts does God present us in and through them, and how shall we receive these gifts without minimizing the astonishing Christic gift that God has given us to pass along? And so forth.

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I trust, of course, that the conversation at Belleville will waste no time in getting down to questions of this "rubber-meets-the-road" variety. If it doesn't happen in the formal presentations where groundwork is laid, it will surely bubble up in the talk that goes on around coffee pots and bottles of wine at day's end. How could it not? After all, there's not a one of us who doesn't deal with these issues every day. Life and service in the present age of sin demands it. I mean "sin" in the sense captured to piercing effect by the final line of the book of Judges: "In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes" (21:25). Yes, and in these days there is no king in America or anywhere else in the world, at least none that commands universal allegiance, and it sure isn't Christ; with the consequence that more and more people insist on *believing* "what [is] right in their own eyes." I'm expecting keynoter Steve Kuhl to insist at the conference that pluralism as a theological proposal and operative religious construct is a recent innovation. I'll bet he also points out how the innovation is nothing more than the latest effort to address a condition that's as old as the hills. Eve to Adam (or vice versa): "*Don't* tell me what to think! Don't you dare!" And both said—and say—the same to God. And all through the ages they keep groping for ways to get along despite their disagreements about ultimate things. What is street-level pluralism ("We all believe in/worship/serve the same god, we just do it in different ways") if not the latest version of that groping? A fascinating version, to be sure, where the fascination lies not least in its duplicity. On the surface it

smiles and offers the peace of a friendly truce, all acquiescing in the twin propositions that no one's tale of the Unseen is "privileged," and that the One or Ones Unseen not only won't mind this removal of privilege but are predisposed to bless it. But suppose one begs to differ with this theory, or even to raise a thoughtful question about it? At that point the teeth behind the smile will start snapping and biting, the way teeth always do when dogma is challenged. (Fast question: what's the difference between a pluralist and a fundamentalist? Fast answer: the dogma each favors.)

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Comes the challenge: the people I spend time with don't do well with snapping teeth. Nor do I, for that matter. Amity is our thing, and for the sake of finding it we'll backpedal even when we shouldn't. The temptation to do that will be all the stronger when the people snarling are the putative proponents of amity and concord, whose objection to us as Lutheran confessors, say, is that our fixation on Christ, the Prince of Peace, is a sin of sorts against peace.

Come the questions: could this be why the confessing of Christ in some Lutheran circles is more flaccid than it was a few decades ago? Or in deeming it flaccid, am I merely imagining things? For my own small part, I'd love to find some folks at Belleville to bat these things around with.

And supposing that kind of conversation did break out one evening over libations of one sort or another, I would toss out the following example, one among many, of the sort of thing I've been running across in my ordinary pastoral duties that causes the antennae to twitch and a tooth or two to grind in bemusement, at least, if not in consternation. And in the mind, meanwhile, the little flag pops up: "What's with this?"

Below are three prayers. They come from successive hymnals, the

ones I've been given to use and pray from over the course of my life thus far. The first is *The Lutheran Hymnal* (TLH) of my Missouri Synod boyhood, the second is *Lutheran Book of Worship* (LBW), published the year before I graduated from seminary, and the third is *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (ELW), as of 2006 the officially favored liturgical resource for ELCA congregations. In each case the prayer is one of several collects, as we used to call them, appointed for the Church's intercessory prayer on Good Friday. The matter each addresses is the obvious reality of a world teeming with people who don't believe in Christ and don't intend to start. You'll notice that TLH refers to such people as "the heathen." Such was the Christian bluntness of the early 1940's and the nineteen centuries prior. LBW dropped that language. I can't imagine anyone on ELW's editorial team daring to say the word at all for fear of being fired. For what it's worth, I heartily concur that politeness pleases the Lord and serves his mission far more effectively than rudeness does.

Notice too that the LBW and ELW prayers come with prescribed introductions to be offered by an assisting minister. TLH was not that fancy. The liturgical reforms launched in earnest by Vatican II had not yet happened.

With that as background, here are the prayers in succession. Read them closely—

TLH:

Almighty and everlasting God, who desirest not the death of a sinner, but wouldest have all men to repent and live, hear our prayers for the heathen, take away iniquity from their hearts, and turn them from their idols unto the living and true God and to Thine only Son; and gather them into Thy holy Church, to the glory of Thy name; through Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord.

LBW:

Let us pray for those who do not believe in Christ, that the light of the Holy Spirit may show them the way of salvation.

Almighty and eternal God, enable those who do not acknowledge Christ to receive the truth of the Gospel. Help us, your people, to grow in love for one another, to grasp more fully the mystery of your Godhead, and so to become more perfect witnesses of your love in the sight of all people. We ask this through Christ our Lord. (LBW, *Minister's Desk Edition*, p. 141)

ELW:

Let us pray for those who do not share our faith in Jesus Christ

Almighty and eternal God, gather into your embrace all those who call out to you under different names. Bring an end to inter-religious strife, and make us more faithful witnesses of the love made known to us in your Son. We ask this through Christ our Lord.

Some observations:

1. The shifts of thought and assumption from one prayer to the next are impossible to miss. They're also tough to pin down and explain. Liturgical editors, like Biblical translators, aren't obliged to provide the rest of us with an accounting for the decisions they make as they go along. I often wish they would be.
2. The most obvious shift is in the description—and implicit evaluation—of the people being prayed for. In TLH they're worshipers of dead idols who need to be turned to “the living and true God.” LBW names them as people who don't “acknowledge Christ” or accept “the truth of the Gospel,” a subtle step or two removed from seeing them as thralls of lifeless falsehood. In ELW they are people who “call out to [God] under different names” and suffer (as we do

too?) from “inter-religious strife.”

3. Accompanying the above are shifts in the problem or problems that God is being asked to address. In TLH—which, by the way, is merely repeating a centuries-old prayer in the Church’s Western Latin tradition—the problem rests strictly with “the heathen” who worship falsely. LBW and ELW identify lack and fault more inclusively. Indeed both quickly swivel the focus of the praying onto the heads of the praying Christians, who are insufficiently “perfect” or “faithful” in their witness to God’s love, to the detriment—perhaps that’s implied—of the people who don’t “believe in Christ” (LBW) or “share our faith” in him (ELW).
4. Finally, there are shifts in the outcome sought for the unbaptized. TLH: that their iniquity be taken away, their hearts turned to God *and* to Christ, His Son, and that they be gathered into the Church. LBW: that they receive “the truth of the Gospel,” a phrase that could well say as much as the TLH prayer says, though it could also say less. ELW: that they be gathered into God’s “embrace,” whatever that may mean and however it may happen.
5. And what’s the role of Christ crucified—it’s Good Friday, remember—in achieving these objectives? TLH: he’s the person given for people to repent toward, and through him to God. LBW, per the prayer’s opening bid: he’s the “way of salvation.” ELW: he’s the one who makes God’s love known “to us,” if not yet or even necessarily to the disbelieving others.

For now my sole and wholly inadequate observations on all this are, first, that the theological distance between the prayer of my boyhood and the prayer intended for my latter working years is noticeable, if not considerable; and second, that insofar as the Church’s prayer gives shape to the Church’s believing—*lex orandi, lex credendi*, as the cogniscenti like to say—then

something different is being conveyed these days about the roles of Christ and faith in God's great project of getting sinners reconciled to Godself and enveloped in salvation. Something different: that's all I'm saying at the moment; not something better or something worse, something more faithful to the apostolic Gospel or something more removed from it. Simply something different: that's where I leave it for now. The prospect of taking up those other questions with fellow confessors is a reason that I, for one, am looking forward to Belleville.

I'm curious, after all, whether I'm alone in sensing some evolution here, not only in tone but also in confession, or whether others feel it too. I'm just as curious as to whether others are spotting a similar evolution in other facets of the prayer, witness, and proclamation that the church bodies we belong to currently promote and endorse. And if so, then I'm especially curious as to how others will interpret this, whether as an improvement, long overdue, in our telling of the Gospel, or as a worrisome sign of failing Christian nerve in the face of rising demands to stick our Jesus in the corner and leave him there, where he won't provoke objection among those who "call out to [the same-and-only God] by different names," or by no name at all, for that matter.

Could be, of course, that we'll conclude after much conversation that both these things, improvement and failing nerve, are unfolding these days in the churches we know and serve. That's certainly possible. Indeed it's likely. Then will come the big question of how we ourselves are called to respond in the work God gives us to do.

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All this is finally to say that there's lots to keep the talk lively and long as our Belleville days unfold, a mere eight

weeks from now. I hope you can be there to share in that. If not, pray for those who will be. In case you haven't heard, the ELCA's new presiding bishop, Elizabeth Eaton, has recently confirmed a commitment she made before her late-August election to serve as preacher at our conference eucharist. She'll also join a Tuesday afternoon panel of synodical bishops to discuss their hopes for the Church's confession in a pluralistic era. That too is a compelling reason to check in at the event. For essential details, and to register, see the Crossings [website](#).

Peace and Joy,
Jerry Burce, for the editorial team

Genetic Engineering

Late last month we received the following thoughts from Ed Schroeder on the intersection of theology and genetically modified organisms (GMOs).

I know little about genetic engineering, but I must confess that my scientist's eye is skeptical of the factual claims in the anti-GMO source that Ed cites. (I also take issue with Ed's implications about Einstein, much of whose work quickly gained widespread acceptance among his peers even if it wasn't held to the same standards prepublication peer review that are in place today.)

I am nonetheless intrigued by Ed's theological arguments, and I expect many of you will be as well. His piece is certainly a conversation starter—as he says in his subtitle, a collection of “thoughts for discussion.”

Should these theological thoughts inspire you to respond in kind, please do. We look forward to hearing from you and considering your response for publication in this space sometime soon.

Peace and Joy,
Carol Braun, for the editorial team

G-O-D and G-M-O Engineering

A once-upon-a-time farm boy's thoughts for discussion

The conclusion of these reflections on my part replaces the 'and' above with a 'vs.': G-O-D vs. G-M-O engineering. Better expressed by reversing the nouns: Genetic engineering is contrary to the Creator's intention for the welfare of creation. Yea or nay on that assertion is what ought to be in the mix with today's GMO debate.

1. Why yea? Genetic engineering's net result damages creation. Way back at the Biblical beginning, humans as God-reflectors were called to nourish/care for creation—both the human creatures and the other ones as well. Damage or destroy is the opposite. The Creator opposes such action. "Destroyer" is the Biblical metaphor for God's opponent in creation.
2. A hint of such damage, at least—danger, for sure—is already in two key terms at the center of the operation. Insecticide and its accompanying term, herbicide. The "-cide" is the Latin word for kill. Killing is dicey business. Initially, the opposite of creating. Can killing ever be creative of anything? Yes, I do swat the mosquito that lands on my arm. But killing poses a deeper issue.

3. Killing is a term that the Creator has reserved for himself. "No god except me: I kill and I make alive. There is none that can deliver out of my hand." (Deut. 32:39) So goes the standard translation of the final sentence. Better translation, I propose, is: "No one should take that task out of my hand." That is, "unless I authorize it." And there is Biblical support for such authorization in some places.
4. The consequence of that exclusive turf-claim is the commandment "Thou shalt not kill," with the accent on the THOU. "It's my turf, not yours. I arrange the balance between killing and making alive in creation. Yes, a balance so intricate, mysterious, arcane, so micro- and macro- complex that you have to be God, not only to see how it all works, but especially to manage it. So don't go there. It's beyond your competence. I've got it covered. You might go there to peek—but on tiptoe, remembering your limited faculties as creature not creator. Don't go there to start mucking around. You can only mess it up with 'cidal' consequences for everybody in the mix." If killing ("-cide" work) is ever to be carried out by humans at the foundational mysteries of existence, GMO engineers included, they need to find divine authorization for that work. Where is it?
5. The claim for some sort of "divine" authorization for GMO engineers (we are doing good, doing the right thing) is linked to the claim that GMOs increase worldwide food production to feed the starving millions, now billions. Data to verify that claim are dicey. [See #6 below.] A recent publication from OXFAM, an organization dedicated to the same world-feeding goals, says that the increase in worldwide food production since the introduction of GMO—and its spread worldwide—is minimal, and that "old-fashioned" ways of agriculture have themselves been

pushing the food production curve constantly up and up, possibly even at a faster rate. How you crunch the numbers is dicey too.

6. Then comes the damage—to the soil, to the ecosystem, and finally to people. Studies on this item—all of which claim to be scientific—are as conflicted as are politics in the USA today. Here theology intersects with science in a new way. Not in the way we've become accustomed: faith in God and "faith" in science in conflict. Nowadays faith in science is itself polytheistic. Conflict inside the house of science. Especially in the GMO debate—scientists contradict scientists. What does "peer review" mean when peers disagree? [So much for peerage!] You have to choose which science/whose science you're going to believe in. [There is now a "Mars Hill" of many differing science-altars, in whose midst I can imagine St. Paul saying again, "There's still one deity unknown here on this Areopagus."]
7. I have looked at some of the offerings at these altars. Their number is legion. Just the other day I learned of the work of now-retired agriculture prof Don Huber from Purdue University. Some in the GMO business dismiss his work and word as idiosyncratic and unreliable. Could be. But then, so was Einstein. Who did peer-review of his stuff? So you have to pick and choose which voice seems to make the best sense. And above all, which voice has no vested interest, personal benefit (patent or submerged), coming from what he or she presents. Canadian Lutheran pastor Larry Denef, buddy from grad school days in Germany way back when, alerted me to Huber, who does not present himself as an Einstein. He has peers who agree and peers who don't.
8. Here's the article Larry sent to me. Check it out for yourself._____

[“Problems with Glyphosate.”](#)

[Editor’s note: This links to a story on [mercola.com](#), an alternative-medicine website that has been criticized by the mainstream scientific community. [The Wikipedia entry for the site’s founder](#) gives a sense of the skepticism with which his site has been met.]

9. One of the strangest conundrums in the GMO business is that the supposed beneficiaries—the farmers, the starving masses—have not risen en masse to sing the praises of GMOs. That’s true of four of my Schroeder clan who are farmers “back at the ranch.” And also from folks intended to be blessed with more food in countries abroad. Why is this? Are they benighted, unable to see the blessings of their benefactor?
10. So why don’t they “just say no”? For some it’s almost impossible. African and South American voices we’ve heard say that. They talk about “new slavery.” And we’ve heard similar voices from here at home. “Right now we’re not sure where we can even go to get ‘old-fashioned’ corn seed,” is what one Schroeder nephew tells me. Which brings up the word monopoly and the world of economics.
11. Monopoly in the world of economics is one of the three forms of the demonization of God’s economic order. I learned that from my teacher Elert. Monopoly is contra-Creator. Two other forms are luxury and slavery. All demonic, that means destructive, of the economic order. All three are in the mix in this issue. A few years ago I translated the chapter in Elert’s ethics on economics. Posted it as a Thursday Theology offering, in two parts. You can find them here: <https://crossings.org/thursday/2010/thur062410.shtml> and <https://crossings.org/thursday/2010/thur070110.shtml>

12. The first of these two has a reference to an early ThTh posting, #548 from December 2008, wherein these words of Elert appear at the very end of one of his books: "But this is really THE creation, God's creation where God's structures when broken do indeed bring recompense. These are the fundamental relationships of man and woman, people and nations, governments and law, and also a wholesome pattern of economic life. The tragedy of our time is bankruptcy of the human soul, evoked by the absolutizing of the last of these relationships, economics. The consequence is scant concern for all the others. For this reason it is only the empty eyes of "entseelter Menschen" [humans with no more soul] that stare at us when we seek to solve every economic crisis. The creator has once more become the hidden God—from whom there is no escape."
13. "The tragedy of our time . . . absolutizing economics." "God's creation, God's structures, when broken, do indeed bring recompense." Is that daily life today—or what? Also in the GMO world? And the concluding sentence too? "The creator has once more become the hidden God—from whom there is no escape." Elert wrote those words in 1932.
14. GMO engineering is busy "changing structures," the structures at the foundation (so far as we know today) of life on our planet. That's playing with fire. Worse than that. Instead of "playing God," it's "playing" with the hidden God. Which is suicide. [There's that "-cide" word again.] Why sui-(self)-cide? "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the (hidden) living God." (Hebrews 10:31)
15. Genetic engineers are deeply involved in doing creation theology. Is it good theology? Good enough? If so, where is the evidence? What are the "sufficient grounds" for that theology? That's what we ought to be talking about in the GMO kerfuffle. So it seems to me. And so far, the

conclusion to that questioning appears clear to me.

Is Jesus' own prayer, "Father, forgive them; they know now what they do," appropriate here? For them? For me? In my case it's been so before.

Seminex Exile – Love It. Don't Leave It

Edward H. Schroeder

[Printed in Strivings (Seminex student journal) Vol. 1:2 (April, 1977).]

"Exile": the NT term for such as us

Many of us in Seminex have had to learn that the exilic tradition is a New Testament tradition, albeit a rather thin one. So it is not surprising that we continue to have trouble with it. The Old Testament context for the notion dominates. We cannot easily get it out of our heads that the term is retrospective, that it points back to the homeland from which we departed. Therefore we wish to be done with exile. "Enough of this looking back over our shoulder to the flesh-pots of Egypt," we say. "Away with words that pull us to the past, for God calls us—and all his disciples—into his future. Forgetting what lies behind, let us appropriate the apostolic counsel and strain forward to what lies ahead. We press on toward the goal of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus!" Fine. Now what would be a good Biblically-rooted word to put that self-perception right up front out in the open?

Guess what? The word is “exile.” Exile is the New Testament word for just such a time as this. Listen to Hebrews 11:13ff. “These all (sc. the great cloud of witnesses) died in faith...and confessed that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. For the people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city.”

Exile, a thin tradition

The exile tradition in the New Testament is thin, but it is not a phantom. Besides the Hebrews passage there are only two other references to the technical term “exile.” Both are in I Peter. All three references portray the same scenario. The exiles are separated from the homeland, but the homeland is not the one left behind. It is up front. Homeland is not where they used to be; it is where they have never yet been. That is what they “make clear” as they “confess” their exilic existence: they are not seeking “that land from which they had gone out,” but a “homeland” (in the words of C. S. Lewis) “further up and further in.

The exile tradition is thin, but not absent in post-New Testament Christian history. Luther latches onto it in his hymn text: “Now let us pray to God the Holy Ghost...as from exile home we are wending. Kyrieleyson.” The medieval advent text sings: “Oh come, oh come, Emmanuel to ransom captive Israel that mourns in lonely exile here until the Son of God appear. Rejoice!” In other worship texts as well the exile tradition is preserved.

The thin tradition sprouting today

Jumping centuries we find in these last days that God’s gospel

Platzregen (passing rain shower), as Luther called it, is bringing the exile tradition to bud and blossom again. Stringfellow writes a book for exiles and aliens in a strange land. Neuhaus in **Time Toward Home** sets Christian exile existence as the cantus firmus of his orchestration for Christian presence in America. One chapter title reads, "Returning to Where We Have Never Been." Fortress Press announces a book on exile theology. And in that current weather map of God's passing showers there has been this "who would have guessed it" cloudburst in St. Louis, namely, us.

Seminex as palpable *Platzregen*

How to avoid *hybris* when talking about one's own Christian existence? One way is to let others do the talking for you. Bob Bertram reports from Munich that Wolfhart Pannenberg talks with delight about the promising future of exile theology in the USA because there is now the publicly visible and publicly designated community, Concordia Seminary In Exile, on the scene here. Most of what has appeared in the exile-theology *Platzregen* has been books. In St. Louis God has brought an exile community up out of the ground! "*Wunderbar!*" says Wolfhart, which being translated is, "Special treats!"

Another way to avoid *hybris* when talking about the great things God has done with us is to let the word of God do the talking. The words of the Hebrews text are resources for seeing ourselves so that we can understand ourselves and thereby be able to talk about ourselves.

Confessed that they were exiles

"Confessed Exiles." In Christian experience confession arises as phase two of a previously-initiated sequence. Confession is responding to a word that has been previously addressed to us. The Greek term in the New Testament says it literally. Homology

is same-saying, that is, repeating, giving back the same words that the conversation-initiator said to you. Confessors same-say what God has first said to them. If the notion that they are exiles is a Christian notion that has gotten into their head, then it got there because God say to them: you are exiles—as in Christ he does. And if in addition he provides them (as he has us) with the historical scenario, the de facto sign of homelessness, how can they avoid confessing about themselves the very words of the Hebrews text? We are exiles. Homeland is up ahead. We are gifted with the “realized ecclesiology” of an exile community.

To whom do such confessors make this same-saying speech? To three audiences. First of all to God, the speech-initiator, who likes to hear his own words coming back to him from people who believe them. Every tongue confessing this gives glory to God the Father.

Secondly they need to say it to themselves, criss-crossing the repetition back and forth to one another in the exilic community. Their temptation is constant—to leave exile with its theology of the cross and settle down for the several varieties of permanence that beckon from theologies of glory. So when the future is impenetrable, or the thin string of promise is fraying and tempers are too, they practice ping-pong homology: bouncing back and forth to each other the confession that this side of the parousia, exile is our permanent condition and that is God’s good news.

Finally they do their confessing to the folks outside. For us at this moment that includes the folks who don’t understand the last line of the previous paragraph—the pre-parousia permanence of exile as God’s good news. Most often these folks are our friends. They are in the movement with us, but they do not always have a clear and specific perception of what Christian

non-permanence in “permanent” exile is. So they need to have us same-say it over to them from God.

Making it clear

“Making it Clear.” Simplify, clarify, specify. With these three words Werner Elert (an unwitting Seminex founder) described the task of Christian theology in our increasingly non-Christian society. We may never be able to make it “perfectly” clear, but we owe it to the sisters and brothers in our movement to make it specific and clear enough, so they can see that the theology of the cross and the ecclesiology of exile spring from the same words of God. Especially when they urge us to get away from our exile hang-up, they must be helped to see that exile is part of the hang-up of the cross. Abandoning one is abandoning both.

God has given us an indigenous community of exile. We need to work out the indigenous ecclesiology of exile and theology of cross to go along with it. Here (as often in Bible and church history) God’s actions precede the theological legitimation thereof (cf. Acts 10). But confessors follow up the action with the appropriate Word that came to expression in it.

Had opportunity to return

The opportunity to leave exile persists. The big temptation is not to go back to 801, however. It is instead to go toward a future that is itself non-exilic, to find some homeland on a current map—geographical, denominational, institutional. We are, as John Groh likes to say, charting a course through a minefield. But the miens most likely to destroy us are not labelled Preus, Dallas Nine, or Shrinking Placement Possibilities in LC-MS. They are rather the mines of mesmerizing self-chosen futures; of financial and organizational links that will “guarantee” our existence; of phobias about our exposed flanks—in the courts, before our critics, and in the ecumenical

world.

What does God want for his exiles? He wants them to make decisions (as they surely will have to) not thereby simply to select a future, but so that as many futures as possible are left open for tomorrow's move "further up and further in." As we move through the minefield we do not yet see which side of that field God has marked as our destination. And if in leading us he should suddenly reverse his direction, we need to hear (so that we may same-say it—that he was not above doing that to his ancient chosen people as well. That is discombobulating, but it is not disorder. It is a different order, the new order of new creation. What it means concretely, we are just beginning to learn, but to learn it and concretize it is exactly our exilic desire.

Desiring a better country

"Desiring a Better Country." What could be better than the AELC? Denominationally, probably nothing. Yet it changes not one significant item of our life in exile. The landscape of AELC is indeed much more pleasant—no question about that—but it is not the homeland. Nor is it the "desire" for which evangelical Christians long.

Lest that sound like ingratitude let it be said again: AELC has the promise of being the best that any denomination could ever be for its own members and for the world those members desire to serve. But it is not that homeland for which exiles are bound. No one would say that exiles in movement through a land had ceased to be exiles just because they found an oasis of refreshment along the way. Isn't that precisely the selfunderstanding that AELC has built into its constitution? AELC and Seminex both acknowledge that the movement of exile Christians is more than the oasis; our destination is more than

where we are up till this moment. Exiles have the audacity to desire a better country, a better future, bigger than any moment or aggregate of moments in their present or past. Dare we say that without shame?

Not ashamed to be called the exiles' God

"Not ashamed." We do stick out like a misfit in the so-called normal landscape of churchly America. Wouldn't it be wise to cover that embarrassment, that "shame," by efforts to become normal and regular, to fit into the pattern of seminary securities: constituencies, finances, recruitment, curriculum, placement, faculty normalities? Nevertheless, when God sends exiles trouble, their first call is to not let the trouble go to waste. That entails not being ashamed of the trouble, for God is not ashamed to be the God of troubled folks. Fact is, he revels in it. Since he is not ashamed to stand with us in our darkness, at times illuminating only a small spot of it, then we can be of good courage too, like the Arch-exile of Hebrews who "for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame." That's how to handle such shame. Well then, how does such shame-less behavior end? It ends where the Arch-exile ended: "now seated at the right hand of the throne of God," i.e., at the "city he has prepared for them.

... He has prepared for them a city

"Our God-Prepared City." The writer to the Hebrews works with the conviction that the brash behavior he proposes is realistic. How often haven't we said and heard those words this past year: Be realistic! But what is realism? Theology of glory and theology of the cross each has its own realism. Theologians of glory, says Luther in the Heidelberg theses, call good evil and evil good, but the theologian of the cross calls a thing what it is. Considering the Realities involved (note the capital "R"),

what is realism?

Are these five Realistic?

1) Our exilic existence and our exilic name are God-prepared realities. We have no grounds for being ashamed of them.

2) As the Constantinian glue between church and empire becomes more and more unstuck, our exilic community is no less than God at work lightening the darkness of our denominational and established churchly world for benefit to others. We are not our own.

3) Concretized homelessness is indeed bearable. It makes faith in the promise a daily community occasion—not just when the balance of mind and of bank account gets fragile.

4) Suppose we were to be threatened with a lawsuit, with a potential judgment against us that could kill us. What then? Let us model our decisions on the New Testament texts of such great witnesses as John the Baptist, Jesus himself, and protomartyr Stephen in their brushes with the law. Like the great cloud of other witnesses, our Seminex too will someday die. Surely the paradigm of trial and death verdict comes on rather high recommendation as one faith-full way to go. Is that morbid or capital-R-realistic?

5) Pressure from others in the movement to be rid of the exile notion should certainly be received with grace. But it should also be countered with our confession that we are taking signals from the Arch-exile up front on our precarious ledge, beckoning us on with the four words he addressed to Jairus. “Fear not; only believe.” No, we are not content with exile. Exile is not home. But with him up front it is the next best thing. It is not the valley of the shadow of death. Once more in the words of C. S. Lewis, it is the valley of the shadow of Life. And the

message comes bouncing back down the valley walls from somewhere up front: "Exile. Love it. Don't leave it."

Edward H. Schroeder

#800 Pop-Cultural Theologies of Glory

For the four hundredth Thursday Theology, we bring you a short essay by Dr. Peter Keyel, an immunologist and Crossings board member whose writing has appeared several times in this space, most recently in [Thursday Theology #771](#). In this piece, he considers the differing soteriologies (of a sort) in the novel and recent film version of J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit*. Along the way, Peter sheds some light on the theological implications of our current pop-cultural preferences for how to get saved.

Peace and Joy,
Carol Braun, for the editorial team

Peter Jackson's *The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey* vs. Tolkien's *The Hobbit*: Are we heroic enough?

I've liked Tolkien's *The Hobbit* and the Lord of the Rings Trilogy ever since my dad convinced me to read past an introduction I thought was too boring and get to the trolls. I was cautiously hopeful when Peter Jackson produced the Fellowship of the Ring, and so I saw it in the theaters. As one

who might be described as a “purist,” I was horribly disappointed by the movie. I could point to all of the things I thought they did wrong, all of the characters I thought they got wrong, but it took watching Jackson’s *The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey* to realize what I didn’t like about Jackson’s vision for Tolkien’s epics: the soteriology, or how people get saved.

Peter Jackson’s soteriology is a theology of glory. He changes the story to reflect that. Indeed, one good thing about seeing Peter Jackson’s work is that it makes one realize how thoroughly Tolkien’s epics are *not* about glory. To examine this comparison, consider a few examples *The Hobbit*. (There are more.)

As I mentioned, the encounter with the trolls is what hooked me on the novel. The dwarves, who are tired, wet, and hungry, see a campfire and send Bilbo over to investigate and hoot like an owl, depending on what he finds. Bilbo finds trolls, steals from one of the trolls, and gets caught. When the dwarves come to investigate, they each get ambushed, caught, and stuffed into sacks, though Thorin puts up something of a fight. The only thing that saves the trolls is Gandalf, who keeps them fighting amongst themselves for so long that they stay out too late and get turned to stone. There is no glory in this version of events. There is no heroism here. Bilbo is caught stealing from someone. The dwarves all attack the trolls because everyone knows that trolls are just evil. Worse, the dwarves fail to prevail in their contest of arms against the trolls. In fact, it’s not even much of a contest.

Now consider how Peter Jackson shot this encounter. The dwarves lose their ponies and send Bilbo out to find them. It turns out the trolls have stolen the dwarves’ ponies, with the intent to eat them. Instead of getting caught stealing, Bilbo gets grabbed by the trolls accidentally. The dwarves all roll into battle with the trolls, and put up quite the fight. So much fight, in

fact, that the trolls must resort to using Bilbo, who has just nobly rescued the ponies, as a hostage in order to force the dwarves to lay down arms.

There are not major changes here, but the changes are to the soteriology—how the dwarves are saved. The dwarves lose against the trolls in the movie because of their honor: the trolls use the old hostage tactic to subdue an otherwise superior foe. The dwarves are so righteous that they have no choice but to lay down arms, even though they could have prevailed had they chosen to. They did the Right Thing. And for good reason: although Bilbo seems incompetent, he at least means well enough to free the ponies. He certainly wouldn't steal, even from someone as evil as trolls, unless it was to protect lives. Both the dwarves and hobbit are heroic in this depiction. They may need some help, but not that much. Gandalf only shows up to crack the rock and let the sunlight in; he doesn't even do much to distract the trolls. Were it not for Bilbo, the dwarves could have saved themselves. It's only because they were looking out for someone weaker that they needed any help. So, in a way, they deserved the help they got.

A second such example arises in the contrast between the book's and film's depictions of dwarves' journey into the Misty Mountains. In the novel, they are captured by goblins, and Gandalf rescues them by dousing the lights and murdering the Goblin King in the dark. The dwarves all then flee in the resulting confusion. They fight a little when they get caught, flee some more, get ambushed again, and lose Bilbo. Bilbo finds his way to Gollum, where he successfully answers some of the riddles only through luck (grace?): Gollum knocks a fish out of the water to give him the answer to one riddle, and Bilbo's request for more time inadvertently comes out as the answer to another riddle.

The movie is again different. Gandalf enters in a blaze of light and empowers the dwarves to take up arms against the goblins. Thorin knocks the Goblin King back. The dwarves slay a whole mess of goblins on their way toward the exit. They may be outnumbered, but each dwarf kills dozens of goblins. The Goblin King blocks their way and attacks, forcing Gandalf to kill him in self-defense. Bilbo finds his way to Gollum, but solves the riddles by thinking hard on the spot. No grace or luck needed. For all that Bilbo may be a city-hobbit, he has what it takes to save himself.

Here, the soteriology is also different. In the movie, the dwarves are heroes: they may need some help out of tough spots, but they can mostly take care of themselves. Bilbo can handle the riddle game; there is no dependence on grace or luck or outside help. The book is a lot more desperate: the dwarves do not have what it takes; they are reliant on help. Bilbo is saved by "luck," not by being a master riddler.

The final, climactic battle scene in the movie lays out Peter Jackson's theology most clearly. In the novel, the dwarves climb up trees to avoid the wargs. *[Editor's note: wargs are vicious, wolflike creatures, adapted by Tolkein from Norse mythology.]* Gandalf lights some of the wargs on fire with flaming pinecones. Goblins soon arrive and then use that fire to set the trees ablaze. Right before Gandalf is about go down fighting the goblins and wargs, the eagles swoop in and save everyone. The dwarves don't really do much of anything except try to climb as high as they can in the trees and hope they don't get eaten.

The movie scene is quite different. Azog (a goblin chieftain who in the novel was beheaded by Dain one hundred fifty years prior to the events in *The Hobbit*, but who in the movie was instead disarmed by heroic Thorin and presumed dead) shows up, and there

is a climactic fight between dwarves, wargs and goblins. The dwarves are driven back, and Thorin has a big duel with Azog. Thorin does lose this duel, but Bilbo heroically saves him at just the right moment. Only after the dwarves and Bilbo have fought the valiant fight do the eagles show up, scatter goblins and wargs, and take everyone away.

Once again, the dwarves are fighting the glorious fight in the movie, whereas they're pretty helpless and unheroic in the novel. In the novel, the eagles save them because the Eagle Lord is curious and because he owes Gandalf. Gandalf does not owe the dwarves anything; their rescue is a free gift. In the movie, the dwarves did a reasonable share of their work. They tried and fought the good fight.

Looking forward, it will be especially interesting to see how Peter Jackson changes the Battle of Five Armies. In the novel, Thorin has a glorious entrance into the battle and rallies the elves, dwarves, and men. However, he fails to fight through even the bodyguard of Bolg (Azog's son and leader of the goblins) and instead is mortally wounded by the bodyguard. He doesn't even rate a showdown with the goblin leader. It is Beorn, in the form of a giant bear, who scatters the bodyguard, recovers Thorin's body and squashes Bolg like a bug. My prediction is that Thorin will still die, but he will take Azog with him. His glorious charge will get him much further in the movie than it did in the novel. Beorn might help, but it will be Thorin's show.

So what? These are the messages that our culture sends to us: theologies of glory. We don't like being incapable, unheroic, or dependent on someone else. It doesn't sell. It's not the example we want, or look up to. The dwarves *should* be heroic. In a movie we can sell that image. We can show a heroic Thorin, and dwarves deserving of glory, and we can hold this up as an example. In reality, of course, we don't quite cut it. We're not heroic,

much as we try to tell everyone that we are, and much as we burn ourselves up trying to live up to that example.

However, we also have a different example. This example is much closer to Tolkien's work. In a way, we are Tolkien's dwarves, the Noris, Bifurs, and Bofurs. We're on a quest, but we cannot accomplish this quest by ourselves. Honestly, we don't really have much of a part to play in the success of our own quest. We don't just need some assistance, we need total assistance. Only instead of Gandalf or the eagles, it is Jesus to whom we look. Not Jesus-the-empowerer, but Jesus our Savior. We don't have to be heroic or glorious. Jesus has handled all of that, except that he wasn't heroic or glorious either. He was killed as a criminal. Yet this is where God's glory came, in resurrecting Jesus from the dead. This is where God's glory comes to us, the unheroic and the inglorious. We're not transformed into superheroes as a result. It doesn't matter how miserably we fail, either on our own or even when trying to do it "with the help of God." We will still die. What's different is that we're free to pursue our quests, confident that Jesus will see us through all of the perils, even that of death.

#799 Justification by Grace through Faith": What Does This Mean?

Colleagues,

Another Reformation Sunday is upon us, and this year so much so

that even preachers in traditions that don't pay heed to Lutheran festivals will be obliged by the standard lectionaries (Revised Common as well as Roman Catholic and Episcopal) to address the core issue that occupied Luther and his colleagues in 1517 and thereafter. The issue? Justification, or in plainer, less Latinate English, being made right; coming out all right. "Two men went up to the temple to pray." One went home justified—sorted out, right with God; the other did not (Luke 18:9ff). That's the Word our ecumenical friends will be wrestling with this Sunday, even as we Lutherans slog away at Romans 3 and John 8. I'm half tempted myself to set John 8 aside for once and use the Luke passage as the day's Reformation gospel. It would work just fine. Again the issue: what justifies? Or rather, who justifies, and on what grounds, and with what as the outcome for ungodly types like us who need that justification?

There's a danger in putting it like this, of course. It invites the thought that one's job as a Reformation Sunday preacher is to explain a doctrinal formulation. But that's not preaching, it's teaching, for which there's certainly a crying need in these 21st-century days of massive ignorance about Scripture and doctrine alike. But as in the 16th century, so also in the 21st: the greater need by far is for the living Word of God, dancing with promise, that the doctrine is designed to support and secure. Such a Word, cast in present tense, grabs hearers by the ears and achieves what the doctrine describes, that is, it sets people right by evoking their faith in the Right One Who Makes Right. Delivering *that* Word is what preaching is for.

Question for this Sunday: how might a preacher use those quintessential Reformation texts, Luke 18 among them, as a springboard for filling a room with God's good news in Christ for the people the preacher is looking at and talking to? And assuming the springboard includes Romans 3, how does one go

about translating Paul's discourse on justifying faith into words and concepts that stand a chance of evoking the faith that justifies? Plain English (or German, or Swahili) is of the essence, for sure. So is a modicum of imagination, combined with a willingness to take the risk of missing the mark you're aiming for. Where the latter is concerned, it helps to recall the astonishing risk Christ takes in employing the likes of us to hold the bow and shoot the arrow.

These things noted, see below for a quiver's worth of words that flew some years ago from the pulpit I occupy on Sundays. I was aiming at the time both to teach and preach: on the one hand, to make the phrase "justification by grace through faith" intelligible for folks who don't talk like this among themselves, and, on the other, to invite, on that particular morning, some refreshed and justifying confidence in the God who justifies. Did I hit those marks? Did I even come close? Who am I to say? I pass the effort along even so for others to chew on, preachers in particular. Perhaps it sparks thoughts of your own, whether of things to try or of things to avoid. In either case, to God be the glory through Christ our Lord.

Peace and Joy,
Jerry Burce, for the editorial team

The Clunker and the Porsche: A Reformation Sermon+ *In Nomine Jesu* +

From the Second Lesson: *Since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God they are now made righteous by God's grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith" (Rom. 3:23-24).*

Five hundred years ago the text I read to you just now turned the Christian world on its head. Actually it was God who turned the world on its head, God the Holy Spirit who got some preachers to preach it and some hearers to hear it for what it is: the Gospel of God, the heart and center of honest human hope. Justification by grace through faith. That's how theologians learn to say it. As a rule it takes them many years to figure out exactly what they mean by this.

We've got ten minutes this morning, twelve or thirteen at the outside. I'd like to celebrate the Reformation today by doing my best, as a preacher of the Gospel, to help all of you understand more clearly what St. Paul is talking about. To that end, a little story. A wild little story at that—

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There was once a young man, a high school dropout, going nowhere, and he knew it—and hated it. He hated going nowhere, because, you see, he harbored a dream, a dream sparked by a picture he'd seen way back when, in a fourth-grade social studies text book. It was a picture of the Alcan highway, the 1500-mile road that runs you from Dawson Creek, British Columbia up to Fairbanks, Alaska. He wanted one day to drive that road—starting from Cleveland. That's where he lived.

Now a dream like this takes a car. A good car, and the gas to run it with. The young man had neither. A few years earlier he'd cobbled together some leftover pennies from his Burger King job, and he'd bought himself a \$500 clunker. Now here's the thing about \$500 clunkers. They don't get you very far. I know. I've owned a few myself. Luckily this young man knew just enough about mechanics to keep his clunker clunking along. It helped that he lived near a junk yard. The owner of this junk yard was unaccountably kind, and he'd let the young man forage for parts

and buy them at a discount rate, even for a junk yard.

Even so: this was still a car, and a car-owning young man, that was going nowhere, and not to Alaska, that's for sure.

Now here's where the story gets strange. Into this young man's life there came one day another young man, let's call him Fred. It's as if he simply popped up, out of nowhere. One morning the young man was poking around in the junk yard, and there stood Fred, and he came over and struck up a conversation, and before you knew it the two of them were hanging out together, thick as thieves, you might say.. Pretty soon the young man learned that Fred had not only been to Alaska, he had come from Alaska, and he had driven that road, the one the young man had always wanted to drive. And here's another funny thing: it emerged pretty quickly that Fred was rich, that he had connections, that he could hang out with anybody in the world he chose to hang out with, yet for some reason, there he was, hanging out in the junkyard with the high school dropout. The two of them would drive around together in the young man's old clunker, and the young man began to notice that the clunker, for some reason, always ran better when Fred was in it. It didn't stall so often. It didn't blow quite so much blue smoke out the tailpipe, you know. I mention this in passing, though it's really beside the point.

Anyway: one morning the young man woke up and Fred was gone. He knew it because there was a big brown envelope taped to his door, and in the envelope were two things: a letter, and a set of car keys like no keys the young man had ever seen before. The letter was short. It said, "It's been great. I've gone home. I want you to come see me. Look in your driveway."

The young men looked. There in the driveway sat a brand new Porsche. An SUV, no less. They call it the Cayenne, as in

Cayenne pepper, I suppose. Tucked under the windshield wiper was another envelope and in it the following items. First, title and registration in the young man's name; second, a certificate of insurance paid up in advance for the next ten years, no deductible, unlimited coverage. Finally, another note. It said simply: "Drop my name at any gas station in the U.S. or Canada and they'll fill the tank for free. For oil changes and all other maintenance stop at any Porsche dealership. Again, just drop my name."

I told you it was a wild story.

How does the story end, do you think? For my part I can think right away of three possibilities:

Scenario One. The young man jumps in the car, turns the key, and purrs down the road at 80 miles an hour. On his way to Alaska he keeps running into other young men, and whenever he does he pulls over and invites them to hop in and take the Porsche for a joyride, just for the sheer fun of it.

Scenario Two. The young man stands there in disbelief, shaking his head. He says, there's got to be a catch. The world, he says, doesn't work like this. I drive this thing, and I'll get arrested, or I'll wind up with a bill I just can't pay. So he promptly parks the Porsche in a garage and leaves it there against the day that Fred comes back to claim it.

Scenario Three. The young man is annoyed. He says, "Real men don't drive to Alaska in borrowed cars. I'll make the trip on my own or I won't make it at all." Which means of course that he spends the rest of his life clunking around the streets of Cleveland blowing great clouds of blue smoke.

Again, how shall the young man's story end? How shall yours?

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“If you continue in my word,” says Jesus, “you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (John 8:31-32).

If you, who believe in me, continue in my word. Not in your word; not in the world’s word, or the devil’s word; not even in God’s word, that is, God’s ten-commandments word, the one passed down through Moses and the prophets—no, says Jesus, if you continue in my word, the word I bring from God. And you know the word, of course you do: “I am the way, the truth and the life.” Again, “God so loved the world that he gave [me] his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in [me] will not perish but have eternal life.” That’s my word, says Jesus. And when you continue in that word—that’s when the truth sinks in. That’s when freedom dawns.

Freedom. Freedom is purring down the road, the one that takes you not to Alaska, heaven forbid, but to the age to come and the Father’s home that’s waiting for you there.

Mind you, it’s a long road, and a tough one. All along it are ditches of disappointment and potholes of sin. There are mountains of sorrow to cross. At one point the road heads directly into the canyon of death, and at this point there’s no alternative route. You simply plunge in. Whether you come out on the other side or not—that depends on the car you’re riding in. Old clunkers don’t make it on the age-to-come highway. They never have. They never will.

Truth time: are you baptized? Then in your driveway, right now, sits the Porsche of righteousness. Your friend Jesus Christ has left it there for you, and yes, you’re holding the keys. So use them, why don’t you. Hop in, crank the engine, tromp on the gas. Have fun. Better still, taste some joy—the joy of real freedom in a vehicle that no obstacle can stop.

This, more or less, is what Luther and his colleagues were

talking about five hundred years ago. The basics appear in those famous ninety-five theses, the ones he posted on the church door on October 31, 1517.

What he complained about that day was a church that was telling people to ignore the Porsche and to stick with the old clunker: their own worth; their own merit; their own strength and ability to please God and to do what God wants.

Old clunkers get you nowhere fast, said Luther. Why in heaven's name are you turning your noses up at the gift of Christ, his righteousness for you? How dare you teach others to do the same, Luther said.

And to folks like you, like me, he echoed St. Paul: "Jump on in and take the Porsche for a whirl." No it's not yours in the sense that you earned it, you bought it. Then again it is yours. It's yours because Christ the true owner has turned it over to you. Don't you see, there's a party brewing at the far end of the road, and Christ wants nothing more than to have you there, and it's not just Christ. His Father wants it too, as we all heard in the parable of three weeks ago, the one about the wedding banquet. The guest list is long since drawn up, and your name is on it.

So jump on in, and hit the road. You are justified—made righteous—by grace through faith. That is, you are perfectly all right with God because Christ Jesus did everything right for you, and you really are all right when you trust this. "I will forgive their iniquity," said God through the prophet. "I will remember their sin no more" (Jer. 31:34). When it comes to you, to me—to every other human sinner—that's exactly what the death of Jesus got God to do. That's why the cross of Christ, etched on our foreheads in Holy Baptism, is our key to the future. The promise that God has already forgotten tomorrow's sin—that's the

gas in the tank that will get us there.

These days the difference between a person with a future and a person going nowhere is not that one holds the key and the other doesn't. It's that one trusts that she holds the key, and has a right to hold the key, and a right to use the key she holds. The other trusts none of this. Silly fool that he is, he sticks the key away in the corner of his sock drawer and keeps driving around in his obnoxious old clunker. I mean that he keeps measuring and treating himself and everybody else not as we are in Christ but only as we happen to be in and of ourselves. Doing that he spends his days blowing clouds of blue smoke and choking on it.

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A final thought:

When you are all right with God—and in Jesus Christ, that's exactly what you are—then who or what can stop you? Who or what can dismay you? Who will dare to assault you, or if they do, what can they possibly hope to accomplish by this? "All things are yours," writes the apostle. He doesn't say all things *will* be yours, he says all things *are* yours: "whether Paul, Apollos, Cephas, the world, life, death, the present, the future: all are yours, because you are Christ's, and Christ is God's" (1 Cor. 3:21-23). We have an expression for this. It's called "being in the driver's seat."

Some kind of driver's seat, isn't it. The car that goes with it is mighty fine. What say we all spend this week taking the thing for a whirl? How else shall we thank and praise God for the Gospel of Jesus Christ, if not by using it?

+ Soli Deo Gloria +

Like Movement, Like Seminary

Like Movement, Like Seminary

Robert W. Bertram

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Recently at Christ Church Cathedral here in Saint Louis we, Seminex, presented our upcoming graduates to the Church as candidates for that Church's ministry. Yet "the Church" which received them on this occasion was represented only by presidents of AELC. But AELC, of course, represents only a part of Seminex' constituency—a large part, a favorite part, but still only a part. Those AELC presidents in the chancel that evening are our dearest friends, our "partners" with whom we have been through a great deal together. But even they, as they said, could promise only so much. As Synod President Neunaber reminded us in the ceremony, he could not "speak for the whole Church." He was touching on one of Seminex' foremost needs: how to relate to our whole constituency?

For instance, in that same service many of the worshipers, very many, were from congregations still in the Missouri Synod – in the Synod but not of it. The graduates themselves, as with Seminex students generally, are still mostly from Missouri congregations. More often than not, in fact, our graduates wind up being placed back within that synod – in and with it but not under it. Seminex' own faculty, while eager members of the AELC, are in most cases still members of Missouri's clergy as well – "in a stance of confessional protest," to be sure, and all of us scheduled for early expulsion. Whether, even then, we shall

acknowledge the authority of that synod to expel us and to annul the calls it once gave us is by no means automatic. Too many Christians in that synod are still reaffirming those original calls of ours. They do so even financially. Reckoned by synods, Seminex' largest source of support is still the givers from within the Missouri Synod.

Still, those same faithful constituents have little say-so in the operation of Seminex. For instance, they have no direct voice in choosing members of our board, which is to represent them. AELC, as of course it must, does have such a voice. But not even ELIM, which once had that voice, has it any longer. That is one of our sorest needs: for our whole constituency to be represented.

There is another, a second way we at Seminex must reflect our constituency, namely, by being collegial in our own decision-making – collegial, that is, as opposed to hierarchical or managerial. At least as I perceive our confessional movement, it is pastors and people in the congregations who want to take responsibility for the movement. Especially so, if they are expected to take the consequences of it. And isn't that where the movement right now is being most consequential, not at the national but at regional and local levels? We do not want leaders who are merely responsive to us and who then spare us the responsibility of the final decisions. We want not only to be responded to but to be held responsible, together. One of the most hopeful things about AELC is the way its elected leaders are striving to keep responsibility where it originates, the grass roots. Seminex is working hard at the same goal within its own community. Being at Seminex does have consequences, good and bad. No one has to bear those consequences quite so directly as do staff and students. So they try hard to bear responsibility for the consequential decisions as well, collegially. Like movement, like seminary.

Third, the confessional movement is not in business, anymore than AELC is, to perpetuate itself. Neither may Seminex be. Seminex, I believe, exists to help the confessional movement toward that nearest possible future when neither the movement nor its seminary are any longer needed as separate entities. For us at Seminex to be separate even now from other good Lutheran seminaries is at best an emergency measure, so that when we do combine efforts we will not come empty-handed.

But the combining of efforts across synodical lines is already happening out in the movement at large, and again more at the local level than anywhere else. In some localities Lutheran congregations from all national bodies, with or without those bodies' blessings, have become wondrously close-knit. So close-knit, in fact, that not even a Missouri congregation in that local fellowship could be attacked by its synodical authorities without the whole local Lutheran community coming to its support. At that point the "confessional movement" can no longer be reduced to a separate synodical phenomenon.

Seminex, too, might hope for something as close to local congregations as that, and as pan-Lutheran. But not yet, not in Seminex' present condition as a separate, almost synodical institution. We are still "between the times." On the other hand, there could be something quite Christian about our announcing that in its present isolated form this seminary plans to die, then to come back alive in new form, as soon as our assignment on this temporary witness-stand is done—the Lord giving us that kind of death and resurrection.

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[Like Movement, Like Seminary \(PDF Version\)](#)