

# **Ordained into Whose Ministry?**

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## #798 The Quest

Today we bring you a long read: a thought-provoking essay by the Rev. Dr. Kenneth Dobson. Ken is a retired Presbyterian minister, now working in the office of the President of Payap University, in Thailand. He is a friend and theological collaborator of Ed Schroeder, and his writings have appeared several times in the pages of Thursday Theology, notably on Christian-Buddhist themes.

In this essay, Ken grapples with the question of how Christianity deals with the current crises of the human condition—an apparent conundrum, given the finality and completeness of what Christ accomplished for us in his death and resurrection.

A list of Ken's textual sources follows the essay.

Peace and Joy,  
Carol Braun, for the editorial team

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## The Quest

### Kenneth Dobson

T.S. Eliot mentions a fisherman sitting or mired on a forsaken muddy riverbank while rats of death scramble ominously among the weeds. The key to the mysterious fisherman's identity is the title of the poem, "The Waste Land." The fisherman, scholars agree, is a reference to "the Fisher King," keeper of the Holy Grail. The Grail was a vessel, presumably the chalice of the Last Supper used a day later by Joseph of Arimathea to collect blood which was spilling from the wounds of the crucified Christ. The legends say that Joseph brought the cup to England where it was guarded by the Fisher kings in the Castle of Corbenic. In the Arthurian legends this castle and the Grail became the objects of a great quest.

*It [the Grail] was believed to be kept in a mysterious castle surrounded by wasteland and guarded by a custodian called the Fisher King, who suffered from a wound that would not heal. His recovery and the renewal of the blighted lands depended upon the successful completion of the quest. Equally, the self-realization of the questing knight was assured by finding the Grail. [British Library]*

In the legends of King Arthur, Sir Galahad completes the quest, heals the wounded Fisher King, and restores the wasteland. Throughout the high Middle Ages the quest for the Grail was imbued with mystic significance.

*For the medieval mind, since the grail was supposed to have*

*contained the Blood of Christ, it had also held His "soul" and possibly His divinity. It possessed unlimited powers of healing and was a means of transmitting direct knowledge of God, "a special essence." The search for the grail becomes the awareness of Christ abiding within. [Grace]*

Eliot's reference to the Fisher King in the midst of a wasted landscape outside London is a metaphor for civilization and all the people in it. Theologically it is about soteriology. The quest is salvation. The Holy Grail is symbolic, not of a device for a mystical union with God, nor even less Dan Brown's womb of Mary Magdalene interred in the tip of an inverted pyramid in the Louvre, but for restoration of creation through the intervention of Christ. Reference to the crucifixion of Christ is obvious in all grail legends. What is not so obvious is just how the instrumentality of the cup is efficacious. Sister Madeleine Grace says the Grail "possessed unlimited powers of healing and was a means of transmitting direct knowledge of God." She is clear later in her article that the Eucharist also confers just such blessings, although perhaps in somewhat lesser measure than the medieval questors hoped for from the Grail.

Whereas the distinction Luther passionately labored to describe between his own understanding of the theology of salvation and that of Thomas Aquinas is hard to see if Thomas's writing is removed from context and considered solely as a set of independent texts, the difference becomes clearer when a medieval lens is used to look at what had become of "salvation" by the fifteenth century. It was, in the popular mind, not about what Christ had accomplished once and for all, but something still ongoing, symbolized in the tradition of the Holy Grail as a quest. Pilgrimages, crusades, and quests were adventures into the unknown, the realm of incredible holiness. They were designed and understood to be transformational in that such an

undertaking could not be anticipated without the questor undergoing profound change. It is arguable that Christopher Columbus was the last great questor and the first great explorer in Renaissance Europe. From Columbus' writings it is clear that he was doing more than looking for a route to India. His whole effort, in fact, only makes sense, as he explained it, if the quest for Eden is factored in. He expected to be a pivotal figure in transforming Christendom. That was the mood of the times.

Quests and pilgrimages, then, can be described from various points of view. They are in some sense historical and can be assessed as human events. Columbus sailed the ocean blue. It's a historical fact. What his quest accomplished was pivotal, transforming Spain and Europe as well as Columbus himself. Quests and pilgrimages also had an impact on the ones who undertook them. That was undoubtedly the major effect. The journeys did something holy and helpful to the questors and pilgrims.

The question for us is, and remains, whether these accomplishments were salutary.

Luther hotly contended they were not. Nor, he and the later Enlightenment philosophers and scientists agreed, were cups, cloths (see Shroud of Turin), icons, amulets, relics, or feathers from the wings of angels of any salutary effect—nor were indulgences, sold to raise funds for the Pope's coffers. The point being that the mechanics of salvation are distorted when a necessary element is supposed to be supplied by us. These fall under the headings of magic and righteous work. The trouble with work's righteousness (including the idea that we can make any contribution to our salvation) is that it turns out to be impossible. That was the burden of Luther's argument based on the writings of Paul. At some point Roman Catholic theology and

piety make room for good works being productive of eternal benefits. That is the point at which they fail to reckon Christ was totally effective. Our salvation, Luther argued, is not a cooperative endeavor between Jesus and us.

John Calvin, a younger contemporary of Luther, came at this from another angle. Our works, including anything theologically significant, including crusades (ancient and modern), are effects, not causes. They are responses we make to the goodness we perceive in God. Good works and zealous spirituality are indications of salvation, perhaps, but they have nothing to do with bringing salvation about. Calvin, like Luther was adamant that nothing we do has any effect on salvation, which was fully accomplished before we came along. To make his point emphatic, Calvin seized the concept of predestination, to the effect that "so little have we to do with bringing about our salvation that we should understand the issue is over and done with before we were born. Some are predestined for salvation, and that's that." Calvin was at odds with Luther and almost all other theologians over this explanation of how salvation works.

The "bottom line" for the Reformation is that nothing we do or fail to do has any impact on our eternal salvation. Any concept of salvation that includes even an iota of human contribution or involvement is not orthodox Christian, that is, not theologically defensible. Furthermore, any theological structure or system of thought which does not have a soteriology completely accomplished by Christ is not authentically Christian.

Let me be clear: what we believe or do not believe has zero impact on our salvation; what we do or do not do has no effect on our salvation either to secure it or to undo it. Salvation is about what Christ did. There are no meditation practices that can save us, no campaigns for humanitarian issues that can touch

our salvation, and no atrocity we can commit that will negate what Christ has done.

This campaign of Luther and the Reformation theologians challenged the sacramental systems of the Church (Eastern Orthodox as well as Roman Catholic) and undermined the authority of the Pope. A century of bitter warfare eventually settled the issue of Papal power in favor of secular power and religious freedom. But the more basic issue of how sacred enactments are effective is an ongoing argument often carried out these days by opposing groups simply ignoring one another—an arrangement not without merit.

What then of current religiosity, which is about being fair and nice, being happy and feeling good? Does the fact that this fails to mention Christ undermine its validity? The same question can be asked of any number of other constructions about the human condition. For example, what of Buddhism's analysis that the cause of human suffering is striving, while the cure is enlightened understanding? What about the current "Jesus and Me" theology? Does the fact that it mentions Jesus validate it? Its analysis of the human condition is that we are unfulfilled and not optimized without a passionate personal relationship to Jesus. When we have that we are blessed, that is, we are nice and fair, happy and feel good, as well as have a bright future here and hereafter. What do the big historic and geophysical threats say about the comprehensiveness of "Jesus and Me" theology?

The issue can be considered this way: is salvation disconnected from people's social, physical, and cosmic condition? Christianity's harshest critics have faulted Christian theology precisely on this point. If the central point of Christian theology is soteriology, and our salvation does not have any connection to what we think, what we do, or how we live, then

theology seems to be irrelevant to life. On the other hand, if there is a connection, what is it?

It is beyond my ability to analyze “the human condition” as we are confronting it. Perhaps it is sufficient to list a few of the subheadings under which particular crises are clustered:

1. **Environmental sustainability.** The margins within which human survival can be sustained are being reached. Perhaps the dynamics are already too far along to be reversed before a catastrophe strikes that sends us to the same destiny as the dinosaurs.
2. **The culture of violence.** Human beings tend irrationally to resort to violence in order to solve problems indirectly. In other words, the violence does not actually address the issue. The culture of violence has led to almost constant war for several human generations, perhaps since the beginning of recorded history. The abilities to perpetrate and withstand violence have become indicators of human quality.
3. **Human dignity.** Divisions on artificial bases (i.e. racism, ethnocentricity, tribalism, etc.) are nearly universal. Now that technology has connected peoples and amalgamated their welfare, the impact of these artificial distinctions is increasing with no sign of abatement.

These will do to represent the mega-issues of today.

In contrast, our oncoming Millennial Generation is concerned about personal authenticity. They understand that God has a role in origination (creation) and “watching over” the world. This is modern theism. What exactly is involved in “watching over” is apparently left up to God. Theoretically it includes the three sub-headings listed above. But the M-Gen is focused on more immediate issues, ones within their zone of influence and concern. Therefore, their concerns are completely



contextualized. It is a basic postmodern principle to reject universalities. Thus, there is no problem with the rejection of the entirely premodern notion that God's solution to the human condition is universal and applies to all. Case-specific divine intervention is consistent with postmodernism and meets the expressed needs of the "Jesus and Me" members of Generation M.

Significantly, this Millennial Generation and the generations that immediately preceded it do not take evil seriously. In their opinion, evil is a lack of good, an absence of authenticity, a human flaw. It does not apply to acts of nature or consequences beyond human control. Tsunami are not evil, they are natural. Pillaging of tsunami victims by looters, on the other hand, as happened the day after Christmas 2004 in Thailand, is evil. Evil is personal. It is infringement of human ethical principles. Rape is evil; it creates victims whose quality of life is impacted by their victimization. Apartheid in South Africa was evil. Bullying of homosexual boys is evil. The list is long. It includes most of the items clustered under the subheadings of environmental sustainability, culture of violence, and human dignity, and more.

Still, the list is trivial. The power of evil is scaled down as long as evil is an absence of perfection on specific personal issues.

This will not do.

Evil is more than the absence of good-enough. Surely the last hundred years have educated us to the *power* of evil. Genocides (plural) and unspeakable crimes against humanity, widely supported by entire populations, have so exceeded the definition of "personal" that there can be no doubt that evil has power of its own. Hysterias, phobias, and manias, all combined, do not account for the pervasive power of evil.

The loss of consciousness about the reality of evil has had a damaging effect on theology and modern Christianity. Fifty years ago the “problem” and mystery of evil were linked to the mystery of God. In its simplest form the problem of evil is, “If evil is real then God is not good; if God is good, then evil is not real.” Once again the dichotomy is false, but the solution is to resort to mystery. In short, evil is a mystery and not a subject to be handled philosophically.

*...the presence of evil is an occasion for obedience rather than for speculation... The mind must do what it can with the problem: but the solution of the mystery is not an intellectual solution, since the question is not an intellectual question.*  
[Miller, 119-120]

Fifty years ago Alexander Miller could still submit that “the figure of the Devil ... serves to locate an origin of evil which recognizes its reality outside the will of men, yet avoids identifying it with the direct will of God, and keeps it always and finally subordinate to Him” [Miller, 119]. The thing to be handled is the presence in the same universe of both God and evil. Always in Christology, the last line is about the paradox being a mystery. What, then, is to be done about evil? Mystery aside, evil is real. Miller argues that the response to evil is to resist. The “archetypical response” to evil is to accept suffering for love’s sake, which Christ did. “[T]o be afflicted by evil,” Miller concludes, “is to be appointed to fight the Holy War on a crucial part of the front” [Miller, 120].

Now, fifty years later, deep into the postmodernist era, ironically “the figure of the Devil” has been expropriated by a section of Christianity in such a way as to excuse human beings from being more than dupes deceived into complicity in acts of evil, imbedded, of course, in mitigating circumstances.

Meanwhile, everyone else dismisses the Devil entirely.

Here we have a perspective on the theological realities. But rather than personalize evil, it is time to insist on its extent and nature. Let us be bold to say that evil is real, pervasive, and influential. Evil is an independent objective force. It is a noun: evil. It is not an adjective with meaning derived from the noun it is attached to. The antithesis of evil is God, not good. Good is not big enough to defeat evil, unless evil is as trivial and circumstantial as this generation wants it to be.

The implication of this was anticipated by Luther in *The Large Catechism*. Luther describes gods in impersonal terms. "A god means *that* from *which* we are to expect all good and to which we are to take refuge in all distress, so that to have a *God* is nothing else than to trust and believe *Him* from the [whole] heart; as I have often said that the confidence and faith of the heart alone make both God and an idol" [Luther, 12, emphasis added].

We notice that (at least in the English translation) Luther leads us to understand that a god is "that from which," not yet "He from whom." Only when we have opted to trust and believe with confidence and faith does God (capital G indicating a specific god named God) become personal enough to identify as "Him."

Then Luther clearly seems to say that we "make" God. God is a product of our heart's desire. Again, Dr. Ed Schroeder is my teacher in this. Lutheran theology is his area of lifelong expertise. Ed repeats, "the deity is a power (not a being)" [Schroeder]. Now we can make sense of Luther's statement—at first glance scandalous, as much God-talk is—that we make God and idols. We give this power over us to them by investing confidence in them to bestow all good (not just some select

good(s)) and to provide refuge.

This is serious theism. This is not the consumer's free-for-all of a farmer's market. This is not a hum-and-haw deal where we pick and choose the blessings we prefer and the shelter that suits us until we can afford something snazzier or need a higher level of nursing care. This is a serious amount of power we are bartering. Note carefully, this is not all the power God has, but it is total insofar as it affects us.

Before going on, let's try to get comfortable with this form of discourse in which we do not consider God in intimate, friendly terms. Unless we are prepared to conceptualize evil in intimate, personal imagery, then God cannot be either. If evil is power, God is power. This is precisely why Luther's presentation is appropriate for our age, loath though we may be to linger over evil and its consequences. To be blunt, Jesus (as in "What a friend we have in Jesus" now become "I wanna hold you, love you" Lord) is inadequate to deal with massive, violent racism that fuels intercontinental hatred and fear. This sort of catastrophe is larger and more lethal and pernicious than the sum of its parts inhabiting individual hearts.

Yet how then is Luther's "God-we-make" any different in power from the "He's-Everything-to-me Jesus"? At first glance both are co-extensive with an individual's aspirations.

The difference to begin with is accountability.

Ask first, "To what are we inescapably accountable?" Several answers tumble forth: consequences, karma, death (and taxes), genetic heritage, luck (fate or destiny), to name a few. Indeed, religious systems the world over have much to say about precisely these topics. One of the salient features of cultural religion is how to soften and divert these laws or forces.

Does the theism of the Millennial Generation also have an accountability scheme? Does the slightly modified “Jesus and Me” theology have one?

According to Smith and Denton there are five items in the younger generation’s belief system. None of them mention accountability or its equivalents. In fact, a rejection of “judgmentalism” is a fundamental aspect of item 2, “being good, nice and fair to each other.” God is benevolent and good.

Critchley and Webster are more precise. In their evaluation, too, there is no outside authority to whom one is accountable, nothing “that might transcend the serene and contented living of one’s authentic life.” Furthermore, “failure...is explained by...merely partial enlightenment for which they, and they alone, are responsible.”

Yet the chickens do come home to roost. This “naïve belief in authenticity eventually gives way to deep cynicism.” Success is a must. But it is never enough to be thoroughly satisfying. However, when satisfactory success is not forthcoming, it is not the whole idea of the “authentic self” as the sum total of meaning that is questioned. One still believes in authenticity and the value of success, but becomes cynical about obtaining it. With no other authority to whom to be accountable, one must report to one’s self. When one is alone and one has failed, one is at the end of one’s rope.

At least in the “Jesus and Me” belief system, non-punitive Jesus can be appealed to for rescue, and counted on to provide it. There is no space in that system for divine non-performance, provided the faith of the believers is strong enough. “Ask and ye shall receive,” is a favorite mantra.

Meanwhile, our chorus has been chanting, “All this is too petty.” Evil is too powerful, too widespread, and too persistent

to be handled by individuals acting on their own ideas of self-interest.

The M-Gen wants to avoid evil. Money is initially helpful, so one consumes one's way toward authenticity, donning the mantle of success, woven by the same wonderful weavers who wove Hans Christian Andersen's "Emperor's New Clothes."

Since evil is large and noisy, the M-Generation needs to manipulate the news media if it is to escape. Facebook and Twitter are highly selective. Whole genres of news can be ignored or only played with, perhaps twisted. Anything is possible: global warming can be rendered a questionable conspiracy, creationism can be presented as a science to refute the unprovable theory of evolution, child slavery is a foreign issue, cats can think up clever aphorisms, the food on the table can be important enough to picture for hundreds and perhaps "go viral."

It is time to refer to the S-word. Reinhold Niebuhr thought about sin more than most theologians in the twentieth century. His analysis is that it stems from arrogance.

*[T]he real issue is the universality of corruption which results from undue self-regard. ...the idea of a universal inclination of the human heart is not only meaningful but is empirically verifiable. It means merely that the capacity and inclination of the self to give its interests undue regard can arise on every level of culture and of moral attainment. The taints of vanity in the lives of saints would attest to the inclination as well as the power lusts of a Napoleon or Hitler. The universality of the taint does not preclude the possibility of mitigating or aggravating egotism by education, social engineering, cultural disciplines or any other method of channeling or transferring man's basic and inordinate self-*

*regard. Nor would it preclude the relation of this self-regard to all forms of creativity. Actually all creative impulses are probably inextricably related to self-regarding ones, but in such a way that the latter are absolute prerequisites of the former. It is significant that political science usually presupposes some version of the doctrine of original sin despite the unpopularity of the concept in modern culture since the Enlightenment. [Niebuhr, 350-351]*

Niebuhr posits corrupt inordinate self-regard as a universal human condition. This is potentially a scathing indictment of the "me era." Since Niebuhr wrote, the trend has actually been for "me" to expand in importance. At first it seemed that postwar (WWII) enthusiasm was fairly innocuous; then came the new hedonism. That was expected to burn itself out, but it metamorphosed into the individualism of the millennial generation that we have been describing. Niebuhr seems to be saying it is basically a corrupt system. He leads to the question of whether anything in this generation's value system has been, is being, or could be transformed from self-regarding impulses into creative, productive, and maybe even altruistic ones.

I think the answer is that nothing can rescue this system until the number of people willing to submit to criticism of their core values reaches critical mass. What is needed is a new sense of identity, a new validity, and a new purpose.

However, that does not mean that critique is avoided. Just because the M-Generation does not want outside interference does not mean that there will be no inside interference. The inescapable fact is that any benefit comes with a charge of some sort. Freedoms come with responsibilities. Causes have effects. Actions have consequences, and so do inactions. Adjustment is

built in. We have already seen how judgment works in the “gospel of authenticity” system, the result being cynicism, which is a toxic poison, I might add. A radically cynical generation is a danger to itself and to the world.

It has been widely argued that there are multiple theisms these days. The “gospel of authenticity” which thrives in the relatively affluent members of the millennial generation in the “first world” is just one emerging theism. There is another theism here in Thailand in which karma creates the balance. There is even a hidden theism in the atheism espoused by 46% of the people of China. What all these theisms have in common is a system whereby A implies not-A. The plusses on one side are weighed and charged for, somehow, in every system. In the end, however, these balances are only an aspect of accountability. Basic, in-depth, transformational critique is not fully represented in them. What sets Christianity apart is the way in which it explains that the arrogant human condition not only abuses others but destroys the relationship by which we are enabled to battle evil. This would be a hopeless disaster except for the fact that the critic is simultaneously our rescuer. Rescue is intervention, coming between the immense forces of God and evil, entering our milieu, extracting us.

Christian apologetics have said that inasmuch as judgment is inevitable it is better to have access to a system in which the final outcome has a potential to be favorable rather than one in which we are bound to fail. There are two perspectives on life. One point of view sees something like “three-score years and ten.” Christianity, Buddhism and all the world religions propose that there is more to life than meets the eye. Some belief systems aim for targets totally in the range of “now and soon,” while others aim for the beyond. Christianity has been labeled and libeled as one of the “pie in the sky” type. We will look at that now.



The question we have been considering is how Christianity, as it has evolved and adapted to various contexts in the West, deals with the human condition. To be honest, it seems to me that Christianity's main *theological* concern is long-range and relatively disinterested in current affairs. Soteriology is about salvation unto life eternal. The other issue is whether what Christ accomplished has any immediacy. In short, does what Christ did have any impact on saving us in the short term from the ravages and effects of this tough life and our own shortcomings? Professor Schroeder says, "The question still hammers us: Was it really all for nothing?" In fact, it seems to me that the many theisms are mostly about filling in a gap between the Old Jerusalem on the outskirts of which Christ's crucifixion took place and the New Jerusalem in the center of which Christ is enthroned and everything will be perfect. This age and this world in which we live is still a zone where evil has power.

Very recently I was told about a couple in Gen-X (the ones in their 40s, old enough to know better). One day Hal came home to find Gennifer in bed with Thad, the pastor of their church. This is very much a local crisis, hardly on a par with massive starvation in China or the flooding of New Orleans, but it is a crisis with a ripple effect. Three weeks later Thad is out of a job, out of a home, ruined. Hal is devastated but not given to hysterical reactions, so is proceeding cautiously. Gennifer was initially suicidal, overwhelmed with shame, and unsure of herself. What does our rigorous theology have to say about this? I wrote to Gennifer from half a world away (I would rather have just hugged her and Hal and said less, shown more unconditional regard for them and their mess). What I said was this:

*The last three weeks must have been a living hell. It is wonderful that you have survived. You and Hal have so much going for you, and so much living already behind you, that*

*there is every chance of you going beyond this. You told us how you blame yourself and how you cannot forgive yourself. What can anyone say to make it better? Words are not the medicine to make this sick go away. But you asked about God, and you asked me to use words so here they are: What you and Thad did has no effect on your salvation or your place in God's heart. God is not saying, "You did that! Now get out!" God is saying, "As far as you and I are concerned, Jesus took care of that. We can go on together, you and me. But, you have now made things more complicated for yourself and the people around you. That will need to be dealt with. But let's take things one item and one day at a time."*

*You need friends. Your closest ones are in your church and you are ashamed to go there now. Open a window, Gennifer. I bet some of those friends are standing outside trying to get your attention to let them in. Hal is staying in for now. Make it easy for him any way you can. Let him get back close to you; try not to hold him away. Remember, too, there are other people who need you just as soon as you can get over shedding your buckets of tears and be available to them. Your grandmother needs advanced nursing care and she is afraid of a nursing home. Your mother is not doing all that well after her mastectomy. They need you. And your kids do too, but you know that. One step at a time, as soon as you can. Then take it just as slowly as the ones walking with you need to go.*

*Now, here is what I expect you will find: there are tracks in the mess that show a way out, there are comforting hands of angels you might not be aware of at the time, there is familiar music coming from somewhere, food will be tasting better. These, too, are gifts from God for these tough circumstances.*

The main point of Christology may be about salvation, but

Christian theology does have things to say, comfort and advice to give, and tools to handle the details of the human condition even before “the last river is crossed”. Paired with justification is sanctification: paired with salvation into life eternal is being fruitful in the life temporal.

To get beyond the morass of multitudinous theisms, can we not, for the sake of progress in the discourse, simply agree with Niebuhr’s analysis that “undue self-regard” is the nature of the human predicament? If that is so, what is the solution? To be effective the solution has to be at the same scale as the problem. This leads us to look for the cause of that condition. The cause we have been considering is evil. If evil is the cause, not the result of the problem, then the solution has to address both the human condition and the underlying cause.

Evil is a God-size problem. It takes God to address it.

I can no longer evade the issue that has made me hesitate: the biblical testimony has been that human sin is the cause of the mess we are in. Christ’s deliverance from sin is the solution. Throughout Christian history the formula of the Church has been along the lines of, “In Adam’s fall, we sinned all.” Sin is the cause of the human condition, and the world is broken because of it. Luther’s thesis was that Jesus Christ took all the sin upon himself and, in Paul’s and Luther’s words, He became sin. As Bertram highlighted it, sin is a predicate for the verb expressing a state of being. At the same time, and this is the crucial thing, he became the Savior, both at once. Only God could do it; only a human person could connect to the human realm of existence. This Christ did, past tense; it is done. But in the process the entire empire of evil has been conquered, a conditional effect to be completed (absolutely, for sure) in the future.

Evil, however, is of another scale than sin. Here's my arithmetic on it: all the sin, and the mounting avalanche of effects of that sin added together, do not yet equal the power of evil; remove all the sin and the consequences of sin, and there is still evil. Evil must have an existence independent of human beings. Sin is not independent of human beings. If evil is larger and more extensive than sin, then sin is not the origin or cause of evil. It may be the other way around. If it is the case, however, that evil is the cause of sin, then why is it not also true that human beings have no choice but to sin? This, too, of course, is an old, often discussed question, which leads around in a circle (as this entire topic does). In order to jump off this merry-go-round I will simply assent as a matter of faith in the face of the mysteries of God and evil that (a) at some point human beings have freedom not to sin, and (b) in some ways we can oppose evil and have an effect on the outcome.

This era in which we live is a transitional one. It is in between the victorious battle and the final capitulation. This is "not-yet" time. The nature of this intermediate zone in which we live is that sin and evil have both been defeated, but the full effects of that have not yet been realized. It is the outcome that is sure. Meanwhile, there are battles to be fought, stratagems to be launched and opposed, and victims to be cared for. Horrible atrocities are still taking place, immense natural disasters still afflict us, chronic conditions have to be confronted, injustice is to be balanced. And it all has to be done over and over, while we try to wrest as much joy and do as much good as possible. We are people with bifocals, keeping the distant mountain in view, but clear about the plains we are crossing.

Our quest is under way.

It is not a quest for salvation, but for allies to confront

powerful evil and for passage across the arid plain. These are critical times. The short-term outcome is still unknown. My strategy for living as a Christian in a milieu of diverse theisms is to engage in resisting evil with the confidence of one who knows that evil is ultimately defeated and even my own destiny is securely out of my hands. This may be effective enough to attract the attention of my allies to the mountain on the horizon. We do what we can do, determined only to make it more difficult for evil to prevail in particular instances. What is left after we survive a skirmish is to keep the mountain in view, form alliances to battle as far forward as we can, and trust the rest to God whose character is clearly up to the challenges. Oh, I will fall before I reach the mountain, but I will awaken upon its peak. That, too, is a mystery under the power of the One who will defeat the power of evil.

In the fifth section of "The Waste Land," the setting is the day between the crucifixion on Good Friday and the resurrection on Easter, after the thunder rolls, when the sky darkens. It is a time not unlike ours. The rats of death scurry undeterred among the weeds of the waste land. The Fisher King's wounds are fresh. The questor has not arrived. The Fisher King muses:

I sat upon the shore  
Fishing, with the arid plain behind me.  
Shall I at least set my lands in order?  
London Bridge is falling down falling down falling down

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# #797 The Passive Church. An Argument in its Favor.

Colleagues,

We lapsed. We missed not one, but two weeks of posting, and even in this third week we're days overdue. It was bound to happen at some point, I suppose. Your editors (three of us on the team) have full-time jobs with demands that flow and ebb, and none of us belongs to that class of super-mortals who churn out quality stuff at the drop of a hat. (Mozart put it crassly: "I write music the way other people piss"—or so I heard in a "Great Courses" lecture by composer Robert Greenberg. Luther might well have said the same thing as he produced theology for the ages. He wrote like a cheetah runs. If I keep pace with an injured snail I count it as a good, productive day.)

Anyway, apologies. And with the apologies, a piece of refreshment from someone else with a track record of whipping up pretty good stuff in consistent and timely fashion, namely your former and worthier editor, Ed Schroeder. He's writing here to an old friend about Theodore Graebner, one of the Missouri Synod's leading teachers and theologians in the first half of the last century. Those were years when the "social gospel" movement was all the rage in mainline Protestant circles. Graebner was not a fan. The conversation between Ed and friend centers on his "drumbeat" assertion that "the Social Gospel is No Gospel." This would startle and dismay lots of U.S. Lutherans today, especially in the ELCA. It strikes us in turn as all the more reason for passing along Ed's sympathetic appraisal of Graebner's views, anchored in Ed's own drum-beating assertion as to what the Gospel is (and isn't), and what the Church is finally for.

Counter-views? Send them in! Your stretched and busy editors are always glad for contributions.

Peace and Joy,  
Jerry Burce, for the editorial team

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*Ed Schroeder to a friend, about Theodore Graebner's "The Social Gospel is No Gospel"—*

Graebner was half-right, it seems to me, with his drumbeat. But why does he sound so un-nice to my ears? I wonder.

Seems to me that I've been on a parallel bandwagon now and then during my ThTh days, as I've needled the N.T. exegetes who now seem to dominate when Kingdom of God is the topic. Their image is a "return to Eden" and that's what they in reading the NT Gospels see "clearly" that Jesus was up to. 'Course he failed, and Roman empire and Jewish society was no patently different after he left the scene. Even so, we are called to make it happen. What Jesus hath not done, we are called to bring to pass.

Somewhere back in my ThTh posting days, seems to me, I did a review of the term 'church'/'*ekklesia*' in NT texts. And I found that with only the exceptions in Revelation, '*ekklesia*' never appears in the nominative case, as the subject of a sentence. Ergo, *ekklesia* never DOES anything. It's always in the objective case (direct or indirect). Things happen TO it or VIA it. It is a "passive" noun.

Which makes sense when you understand *ecclesia* as the gathering. Things happen at the gathering, but the gathering doesn't go out and do anything. The folks gathering and then dispersing from the gathering are, of course, doing—and called to do—all sorts of things, but the action at the gathering (birds at the bird-



feeder) is just feeding and chirping to one another. Thereafter they do indeed fly off into their callings and do all sorts of stuff. But the bird-feeding at the feeder is a stationary event.

The place in Revelation where *ekklesia* does something, if I remember aright, is when the “gathering” at this city sends a message to the gathering at that city. But never does any one of the “gatherings” become a noun that addresses the world.

If the NT never assigns tasks to “the gathering,” not even the task of “preach the Gospel!!!”—then by what authority (who authorizes us?) to engage in such talk as “the church must do this, ought to do that, is called to such-and-so?” Where are the NT texts? Whose are the ears who are to be hearing such mandates?

What are we talking about nowadays when we say “church”? Who/what is “the church” in our standard parlance? Is there any NT rootage for such a notion at all? If the NT gives scant support (none at all?) for our church-as-active-noun-in-the-subjective-case-acting rather than acted upon, “agent” rather than “patient” in the philosophical meaning of those two terms—where does the support come from? Have we so transmogrified the term ‘church’ into something else that we have no antenna for what the apostles meant way back then when they used the term?

If that is so, has the Gospel’s free-course been aided or burdened by it all? And have God’s left-handers been helped or hindered in their callings (whether they trust God’s Christ or not) by calling “the church” (whoever that is) to be their allies?

God’s got left-hand workers on the job in his creation apart from any Christ-connected folks being there. “Law written in their hearts” generates a modicum of justice and “care.” Christ-

connected folks, as fellow-worldlings, have the same assignment already from birth, AND the additional one of gospel-redemption promotion to generate the new creation. At their gatherings, their “ecclesia-ings” they get juiced up for their double jobs. But the gatherings didn’t do those jobs, any jobs; the gatherers do.

Was Graebner—with all his warts and wrinkles—trying to tell us this? “The church” has received no left-hand kingdom assignment from Christ. Christ-disciples have already had those assignments from birth. Re-birth in Christ doesn’t contradict those already-from-birth assignments, but rather supports them.

Reminds me of Bob Bertram’s visual aid when speaking of God’s ambidexterity. He’d put the word DEXTRA on the blackboard, Latin word for right (hand). And then take it letter by letter with hand motions. Left and right hands clasped side by side, thumbs up.

- D – is for different The two aren’t the same hands. Thumbs on different sides, etc.
- E – is for equivalent, both complete, same pattern and equally shaped and operative.
- X – is for Christ , the supreme right-hander coming on the scene, initially going under the left-hand, as Bob turned the hands so the right was below the left.
- T – is for (initially) the right hand “trussing” (=supporting) the good work of the left-hand, but then
- R – it begins to replace this and that component of the left-hand agenda. [Forgiveness replaces equity justice for sinners. Ditto for peace. “Not as the world gives do I give you peace.” For the world’s peace (left-hand stuff) is not bad stuff, the “peace and justice” mantra of today. Actually good and godly, but it’s not Peace with God which the left-hand world can’t/doesn’t give.] Hands now turning

so that right is coming up over left. Finally right hand (now completely on top and left hand dropping away) the right-hand.

- A – antiquates the entire left-hand agenda, even the good and godly left-hand items of old creation. God's right-hand, the new creation in Christ renders God's old creation finally passé. That agenda is God's forever and only agenda. Not Eden restored, old creation rehabbed, but a new creation. If anyone is in Christ, she is already there, we are told.

Is that what Graebbie was trying to do for/with the LCMS? Was it a lost cause then? Is it still now, not only in the LCMS? If the "A" line above is true, it is not.

Cheers!

Ed

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## #796 The Lazarus Story

Colleagues,

Once again we bring you a contribution from Bob Schultz and Rich Jungkuntz. They appeared together last year in [ThTheol #726](#). They continue to work together on a fresh English edition of Werner Elert's systematics text, *The Christian Faith*, Bob translating in Seattle while Rich reads and comments from his home in Thailand. They're also collaborating on other things, as you're about to see. Since what they send is self-explanatory, I'll make mention only of its timeliness. The Sunday will soon be here when preachers who follow the Revised Common Lectionary and related versions will be tackling the most challenging of

all Jesus' parables, the grim little tale of the rich man and Lazarus. I fear that the American church will suffer from a dearth of Gospel that day. The same could well be true in other lands. May it be that the matters explored here will help some of you to preach the text properly and others of you to catch what you won't get to hear in the churches you attend.

Peace and Joy,  
Jerry Burce, for the editorial team

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*To Thursday Theology readers, from Robert C. Schultz—*

Background:

Rich Jungkuntz was working through his father's files after his father died in 2003. (His father, Dick Jungkuntz, was one-time executive secretary of the LC-MS's Commission on Theology and Church Relations [CTCR] and had retired as provost of Pacific Lutheran University in Tacoma, Washington.) In his father's papers, he found a sheet with passages from Luke 16 and John 11 that feature a person named Lazarus. To see the sheet, [click here](#).

Rich's question is, what was his father thinking of as a possible further development of this comparison?

As Rich and I discussed this, we began to see that all of the references to Lazarus in the gospels of Luke and John can fit together in a single package. We make no claim to originality but report it because we found it useful.

Our first set of assumptions is from Archibald M. Hunter *According to John* (Philadelphia, Westminster: 1968):

*p. 39: Peder Borgen thought that John followed an independent*

tradition but that at certain points in the Passion Story we find fused units from the oral tradition behind the synoptics. E.D. Johnston picked out five non-Markan features in John's story of the Feeding of the Five Thousand which had a good claim to be accounted historical, and so made a case for John's independence in this narrative. The American P. Parker, discussing the links between John and the synoptics, especially Luke, found that John did not know the synoptics. His links with them came from a common oral tradition; and it was possible that John and Luke worked in the same areas for a time and heard the same traditions about Jesus.p. 41: In the fourth gospel's account of John the Baptist and the call of the first disciples, Dodd once again finds clear evidence of independent tradition.

p. 46: The story of the raising of Lazarus, as is well known, presents special difficulties. As it lies before us now, it has been "written up" by the evangelist; but in view of the circumstantial details it contains and the abundant evidence that St. John had access to good independent tradition, the one thing we ought not to do is to dismiss it as John's creation out of nothing—or as a miraculous quilt made out of synoptic patches.

pp. 68-69: The raising of Lazarus proclaims Christ as the source of life—eternal life, life over which physical death has no power—"I am the resurrection and the life."

Today scholars agree that the whole burden of Jesus' preaching was the kingdom of God and its coming. The Kingdom, or Reign of God—an eschatological concept—signifies the sovereign activity of God in saving men and overcoming evil and the New Order of things thus established. Now it was the very heart of Jesus' "good news" that this New Order was no longer a shining hope on the far horizon but, in some sense, a present reality in his

person and ministry. And for Jesus, as the synoptics indicate, his mighty works were signs of that Kingdom's coming and presence. They were tokens of the New Age in which the power of the living God was at work through his Messiah in hitherto unknown ways—encountering and defeating evil and the devil, whether it was the demonic distortion of a man's personality, or the assault of disease on his natural vitality and vigor, the foretaste of death, "the last enemy."

pp. 75-77: Much more perplexing for the modern Christian are the Sign at Cana, the Feeding of the Five Thousand, and the raising of Lazarus.

In the light of what we have said about St. John and history we may well believe that John 2.1-12 is based on an actual historical situation at which Jesus somehow saved the situation for a village wedding party. The trouble is that the provision of one hundred twenty gallons of wine when men had already "drunk freely" is not an act of human prudence, still less of Divine Providence.

The story of the raising of Lazarus poses two problems. First: did Jesus really raise Lazarus from the dead? To this we may reply (1) that Jesus himself did claim to raise the dead (Luke 7.22; Matt. 1.5, Q) and that the synoptics record stories of two such raisings—the widow of Nain's son and Jairus' daughter; and (2) that if Jesus is God Incarnate (as St. John and most Christians believe) we cannot pronounce the raising incredible.

The other problem is the fact that the synoptics do not record the raising of Lazarus—an event which, in John's review, made the Jewish authorities resolve on Jesus' death (11.55). According to Mark 11.18 it was the cleansing of the Temple—an event St. John set early in the ministry—which provoked their fatal intervention. Moreover, John's story of the raising of

*Lazarus, however much it owes its present form to his own dramatic skill, not only contains many life-like touches—one thinks of the delineation of the characters of Martha and Mary and the ‘agitation’ of Jesus (11.33)—but makes the story of the Triumphal Entry as recorded by Mark coherent for the first time. Now we know why the people of Jerusalem treated Jesus’ entry as a royal progress. The only evangelist who gives a sufficient reason for this is John who explicitly says that it was the report of the raising of Lazarus.*

We acknowledge that our reconstruction makes and also requires the reader to make these assumptions, at least for the purpose of discussion. In addition to the assumptions of Hunter (listed above), we also make our own independent assumptions:

- All the Lazarus stories are about one person.
- We assume that there was one larger story of Lazarus and Jesus and that Luke and John used various parts of this single story to make their individual points. On this basis, we attempt to reconstruct more of the whole story by placing the various gospel accounts into the context of our larger story.
- In so doing, we have a description of what was happening for Lazarus during the three or four days when Jesus was not responding to the sisters’ call for help and Lazarus had died.
- Lazarus, the brother of Mary and Martha in Bethany, did not come from a rich family. They were poor. Martha did her own (and sometimes Mary’s) housework. (When we were young, we were assured in parochial school that Mary and Martha were not poor and that there were two Lazaruses, since the Lazarus who was the brother of Mary and Martha would not have been poor.)
- Putting all the stories together, we suggest the following

as a possibility: There is a larger story about Lazarus and the rich man. Luke and John—in the manner of the Evangelists—pick out sections of that larger story and weave them into their gospel in order to achieve their own purposes. We have tried to reconstruct that larger story.

The passages highlighted by Dick Jungkuntz are in bold. He printed out and highlighted material in Luke 16:22-31 and John 11:43-53.

### Lazarus is ill and hungry:

John 11:1-2: 1Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. (2Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill.)

### Elsewhere in Bethany:

Luke 16:19-21: 19There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. 20And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, 21who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man's table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores.

### Lazarus' sisters send a message to Jesus:

John 11:3-6: 3So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, 'Lord, he whom you love is ill.' 4But when Jesus heard it, he said, 'This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.' 5Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, 6after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.

### Jesus tells a parable about the rich man:



Luke 12:16-23: 16Then Jesus told them a parable: “The land of a rich man produced abundantly. 17And he thought to himself, ‘What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?’ 18Then he said, ‘I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. 19And I will say to my soul, ‘Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.’ 20But God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?’ 21So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God.” 22He said to his disciples, “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat, or about your body, what you will wear. 23For life is more than food, and the body more than clothing.

#### Lazarus dies:

Luke 16:22a: The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham.

#### The rich man dies:

Luke 16:22b: The rich man also died and was buried.

#### The rich man seeks help from Lazarus:

Luke 16:23-31: 23In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side. 24He called out, “Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and **send Lazarus** to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony in these flames.” 25But Abraham said, “Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony. 26Besides all this, between you and us a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one

can cross from there to us.” 27He said, “Then, father, I beg you to **send him to my father’s house**— 28for I have five brothers—that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment.” 29Abraham replied, “They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them.” 30He said, “No, father Abraham; **but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.**” 31He said to him, “If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, **neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.**”

**Jesus decides to go to Bethany:**

John 11:7-16: 7Then Jesus said to the disciples, ‘Let us go to Judea again.’ 8The disciples said to him, ‘Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?’ 9Jesus answered, ‘Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Those who walk during the day do not stumble, because they see the light of this world. 10But those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them.’ 11After saying this, he told them, ‘Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him.’ 12The disciples said to him, ‘Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right.’ 13Jesus, however, had been speaking about his death, but they thought that he was referring merely to sleep. 14Then Jesus told them plainly, ‘Lazarus is dead. 15For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him.’ 16Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow-disciples, ‘Let us also go, that we may die with him.’

**In Bethany, Jesus is informed of Lazarus’ death:**

John 11:17-37: 11When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. 18Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, 19and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. 20When

Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. 21Martha said to Jesus, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. 22But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him.' 23Jesus said to her, 'Your brother will rise again.' 24Martha said to him, 'I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.' 25Jesus said to her, 'I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, 26and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?' 27She said to him, 'Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.'

28When she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary, and told her privately, 'The Teacher is here and is calling for you.' 29And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him. 30Now Jesus had not yet come to the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. 31The Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary get up quickly and go out. They followed her because they thought that she was going to the tomb to weep there. 32When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.' 33When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. 34He said, 'Where have you laid him?' They said to him, 'Lord, come and see.' 35Jesus began to weep. 36So the Jews said, 'See how he loved him!' 37But some of them said, 'Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?'

### Jesus raises Lazarus:

John 11:38-44: 38Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. 39Jesus said, 'Take away the stone.' Martha, the sister of the

dead man, said to him, 'Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead for four days.' 40Jesus said to her, 'Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?' 41So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upwards and said, 'Father, I thank you for having heard me. 42I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me.' 43When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, '**Lazarus, come out!**' 44The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, 'Unbind him, and let him go.'

**Abraham's prediction that no one would believe because of a resurrection was more or less accurate:**

John 11:45-53: 45Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him. 46But some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what he had done. 47**So the chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the council, and said, 'What are we to do? This man is performing many signs.** 48If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation.' 49But one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, 'You know nothing at all! 50You do not understand that it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed.' 51He did not say this on his own, but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus was about to die for the nation, 52and not for the nation only, but to gather into one the dispersed children of God. 53**So from that day on they planned to put him to death.**

**Jesus visits Lazarus:**

John 12:1-9: 1Six days before the Passover Jesus came to

Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. 2There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him.

3Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. 4But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, 5'Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?' 6(He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.) 7Jesus said, 'Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. 8You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.'

9When the great crowd of the Jews learned that he was there, they came not only because of Jesus but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead.

**Some believed because Jesus raised Lazarus, but others did not:**

John 12:10-19:10 So the chief priests planned to put Lazarus to death as well, 11since it was on account of him that many of the Jews were deserting and were believing in Jesus. 12The next day the great crowd that had come to the festival heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem. 13So they took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him, shouting, 'Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord—the King of Israel!' 14Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it; as it is written: 15'Do not be afraid, daughter of Zion. Look, your king is coming, sitting on a donkey's colt!' 16His disciples did not understand these things at first; but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that these things had been written of him and had been done to him. 17So the crowd that had been with him when he

called Lazarus out of the tomb and raised him from the dead continued to testify. 18It was also because they heard that he had performed this sign that the crowd went to meet him. 19The Pharisees then said to one another, 'You see, you can do nothing. Look, the world has gone after him!'

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## **#795 Liturgy and Gospel: A Snippet of Pastoral Counsel**

Colleagues,

Pr. Ron Neustadt is our contributing writer this week. Recently retired, Ron has been working on a major Crossings project, details of which will be announced when the time is right, which isn't yet. As you'll see below, he's also reaping one of the rewards that come to faithful pastors who win the love and respect of the people they serve. Their wisdom is not forgotten. Now and then someone will tap it. Comes then a test of wisdom, the question being whether one can respond from retirement in a way that doesn't diminish some other pastor who's still bearing the burden of a call. You'll agree, I think, that Ron passes this test with an A+.

And as with style, so with content: again, an A+, where the matter being examined is not liturgics per se—here you'll find some sketchiness, as Ron himself points out in a note that accompanied his submission—but the theological principle by which any and every liturgical practice needs finally to be weighed. Look for it as you read, and allow Ron's wisdom to bless you too.

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

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### *The Question*

Hi Pastor Ron,

It was great talking to you the other night; glad to hear all is well with you and Deb, albeit busy. It is busy here today as I will be helping Phyllis set up for the church's Women's Retreat she has been working on. They have about 50 women signed up for it, which is more than twice last year. She will be relieved when it is over, but it should be very good.

Also, I meant to pose another question to you the other night. It has to do with the place of Confession and Absolution in the liturgy. At the beginning of the summer, Pr. moved it to just before communion. He said that it was an ancient church tradition and that the other church that we merged with (saved from closing) did it that way. I have a book on liturgy by Dennis Fakes, and in the section on confession, he talks about the history/tradition and mentions the Didache (which I then bought on my Kindle for \$0.99) which mentions confession before communion. However, he says that it was to be done in the home, before going to the service. He goes on to discuss the Lutheran tradition and the placement at the beginning of the service, but no other rationale. The translation on my Kindle barely mentions confession and without the detail that Fakes provides. At any rate, I have been uncomfortable without confession at the beginning of the service. The current ELW, and all the previous ones we have, has it at the beginning for all the settings. I have always believed, and been told, that it is at the beginning to prepare our hearts and minds for worship, and to unburden us from the sins of the past week. In addition, Fakes talks about

the assurance of our acceptance through the absolution. I think that for us to be prepared for worship in mind and spirit, the confession should be at the beginning; how else can we be prepared for the hearing of the scriptures and the preaching of the word, all of which comes before confession in our new order of worship. Am I all wet? I plan to bring it up at the next Traditional Worship and Music planning committee meeting, but I've been searching for some info and haven't found too much other than what I've quoted.

If you have time, I would greatly appreciate any comment/guidance you could give me. Any additional references would also be helpful. Thanks in advance for any comments you may have.

Dick

*The Response*

Hi, Dick –

Thanks for bringing an old schoolmate to mind. Dennis Fakes was a classmate of mine at seminary—or at least we were on campus at the same time, if not in the same class. I didn't know he had written a book on liturgy.

Here's the little I know about the matter of the corporate confession of sins in Lutheran liturgical practice:

1. Luther's *Formula Missae et Communions* (1523) did not include any corporate congregation confession of sins as part of the liturgy (mass). My understanding is that was because Luther and his contemporaries simply assumed that confession and absolution (which the *Apology to the Augsburg Confession* identifies as the "third Sacrament") was something that happened between an individual and his/her confessor. I.e., a person confessed his/her sins



individually to the pastor and received individual absolution—and all of that happened at some other time than Sunday morning (or whenever the Lord's Supper was celebrated).

2. I think there are some references to Lutheran clergy (maybe even Luther himself), reciting what is called the Confiteor, a type of general confession, as part of the mass. In this case, the priest would be speaking collectively, for all people, but this was not understood to be replacing individual confession and forgiveness; rather, ritualizing in the mass what would have already happened individually.
3. Over time, brief services of confession and forgiveness for groups of (rather than individual) parishioners would take place, often on Saturday evening.
4. I think it was the Swedes (a Lutheran pastor named Olavus, if I remember correctly) who developed a liturgy that included an order for corporate confession and forgiveness (similar to what we have now) that took place at the very beginning, as preparatory rite. The rationale was like the one you articulated.
5. I don't recall what the Didache had to say about a corporate confession and forgiveness taking place during the liturgy—if it said anything about that.
6. I think the placement of an order for confession and forgiveness has moved from time to time as folks have tried to figure out what made the most sense. I know that there are congregations that place it just before the "service of the Meal" rather than immediately before the "service of the Word." The rationale is that it makes more sense that we, having heard the Word proclaimed, are now freed to make our confession and then move directly into not just receiving the verbal announcement of forgiveness but also receiving it physically in the Meal. I can see

merit in both placements.

7. It's worth noting that the whole issue comes up only because we've moved away from individual confession and forgiveness (in spite of the high regard the Augsburg Confession and the Apology hold for individual confession and absolution).

I'm glad to hear you're talking about things like the forgiveness of sins at your congregation. Sure beats taking up time talking about insurance or paving the parking lot! I'd be interested to know how it all turns out. Whatever you decide in terms of placement in liturgy, anything that will get across the Good News of God's offer in Christ Jesus to forgive us will be a blessing.

Peace and Joy,  
Ron