

#784 Preaching and the teleological temptation

This week we pick up again on a theme we've featured throughout the past several months—namely, the preacher's task. Our writer is Matt Metevelis, a chaplain and pastor who lives in Las Vegas, Nevada, and whose last piece for Thursday Theology was [a book review](#) that we posted last summer. We're happy to share with you his thoughts on the ultimate goals of preaching, and we remind you that we welcome our readers' feedback on everything we publish in this space.

Peace and Joy,
Carol Braun, for the editorial team.

Preaching and the Teleological Temptation

What kind of speaking is preaching? I have struggled with this question quite a bit. What exactly am I trying to *do* when I get up there on Sunday morning? Should I educate, enlighten, or entertain? (My congregation very strongly prefers the third option). Just what is it that this unique craft of preaching is trying to accomplish?

Preaching at its epistemic core is public speaking for the church. The sermon is an address of the preacher to the congregation in order to impart a new idea or clarify an old one. It can be understood as an exercise in rhetoric. Rhetoric, defined best by Aristotle is, "observing in any given case the available means of persuasion" (*Rhetoric* I.2). The preaching task can easily be compared to the burden placed upon every public speaker, to persuade. All public speakers must pay attention to

the way in which they will change hearts and minds by their speech.

Aristotle argues that there are three major forms of persuasive speaking: the political, the forensic, and the epideictic. Aristotle differentiates these by the end to which they are attempting to persuade. The political seeks to point to the expediency or in expediency of an action, the forensic seeks to persuade hearers about the justice or injustice of a case, and the epideictic or “ornamental” form of speaking seeks to illustrate virtue or vice for imitation or scorn.

Preachers have utilized many of these forms, but we must say that preaching in the Christian church is a rhetorical exercise that defies this three-fold categorization because it has its own end. This is because all other forms of rhetoric have ends that are penultimate; they belong only to the limitations of the fallen world. Preachers are divinely charged with the difficult task of pointing beyond the noble but often frustrated searching of humanity after expediency, justice, and valor. The sermon, properly given, seeks to do more than “persuade” its hearers of some new idea or course of action. By using the preacher, God seeks to give an answer to the questions, fears, and agonies raised by the tumult of a sinful and decaying creation. That answer comes in the form preaching’s ultimate aim and end, the person who has become the place where all human striving and suffering ceases. Preaching is different speech because its only *telos* can be Jesus Christ, and him crucified.

Many preachers in North America today invert this pattern by finding in the cross of Christ a way to set out and discover a new *telos* more easily apprehended by their congregations. Instead of offering Christ crucified as the culmination of their sermon, Christ crucified becomes a necessary act which leads to more glorious possibilities. Christ’s dying on the cross becomes

variously an act of selfless love which must be imitated and adored, a necessary step which allows us to gain access to salvation through our complete conversion and fervent efforts to get others to do the same, the source of a new life for ourselves which opens up new dimensions of spiritual and material potential, a conscientious denial of the power of "empire" which is a clarion call for us to work to create a just world more in line with "God's preferred future," and an example of patience and trust to follow as we bear our own crosses in this life. All of these are well-meaning and laudable. Many have arisen out of a deep engagement with the problems and issues that persist in the modern world and are a result of serious concern and study. But all of these make the same fundamental mistake. Rather than seeing the crucified Jesus as the end they fall into the teleological temptation and demote him to a means.

Jesus and his cross become a vehicle conveying one to another destination. And that destination is usually one that terminates within the wills of the hearers to do more works. In the hands of preachers using the cross of Jesus to encourage these works, they are new and sanctified works to be sure. But they are still worldly works. Preaching under this guise pulls the congregation back into Aristotle's forms of rhetoric. The preacher might argue that the church needs to do something expedient like some new method to grow a congregation (political). The preacher might argue the cross as evidence of injustices, in the sinful self or in the political structures of the world, which must be confirmed and corrected (forensic). The preacher might even point to the works of Jesus on the cross as virtues to be imitated by individuals or the church as a whole (epideictic). By degenerating into worldly rhetoric this kind of preaching takes penultimate aims—which rise and fall with the capricious fortunes of this world—and confuses them with the ultimate announcement of the entire world's end, and the new beginning in

Jesus Christ. All of these errors, in a phrase, place the gospel before the law, often with disastrous consequences.

All these preachers will insist that they are preserving the orthodox core of Christianity by making Christ a vital foundation for spiritual life. They are right in that they make Christ vital and necessary, but only as an indispensable means and not the ultimate end. Many earnest Lutheran preachers who claim to be “theologians of the cross” will satisfy themselves in these errors by having made the cross an indispensable means for bigger goals. But speaking of the cross as a foundational event does not avoid the risk of having it ignored. Indeed, many things are “foundational” and “vital” that we could care less about. Take for example my car keys. In order to start my car, get to work, and carry on many things I need in my life, I need my car keys. Whenever I misplace my keys (usually when I’m running late) I find it very distressing. Once I have them I am very thankful. But when I unlock the doors and fire up the engine, they are out of my thoughts even as they jingle and jangle with every bump on the road. Plenty of things can be “vital” in my life while mattering very little to me in my day-to-day business as the source of my longings, my inspirations, and my hopes. Jesus, if he possess this kind of means-only vitality, exists in an eerily similar place in our church and culture, revered even as he is ignored.

Christ and his cross cannot just be a principle used to adorn bigger ideas. This is the core error of the teleological temptation. Proper law/gospel preaching seeks to counter the error of the teleological temptation by making sure that the law which works on our wills is always separate from the gospel which works on our inner being to make us new. The goal of a good law/gospel preacher will always be to keep Christ front and center. By the law properly preached, God calls us to awareness of our limitations even as we are encouraged to make do the best

we can for our neighbor under the world's fallen state. But in the gospel, given in its fullness, Jesus Christ becomes crucified for us in our hearing as the end and literally the death of our grief, sin, sorrow, accusations, fears, doubts, limitations, and worldly works. The law is not a "preparation" for the gospel—and the gospel is not the law's purification, solving its problems or resolving its paradoxes. To be truly good news, it must be something truly new and pointing only to the acts of God in Jesus Christ which are apart and utterly free from the law. These can only be found on the cross. The cross of Jesus Christ is not where we go to hear how to fix the world or live our best lives now; rather, the cross is where we are brought to that holy heartbreaking silence so that we can hear God's promises and know that God means them. Preaching is not a vehicle that the Holy Spirit through Jesus uses to take us someplace exciting and new; it is the place where the crucified God comes to meet us. When the gospel is preached, God comes in the crucified Christ to dwell with the congregation. Hearing the sermon, they are reclaimed by Christ in faith. In the words of the preacher, He is bleeding and crucified for them. This is something Aristotle could have never imagined. We preachers neglect it great cost.

Matt Metevelis

#783 Reexamining the “face of God” metaphor

After we posted Steve Albertin's sermon, "Seeing the Face of God," in [last week's Thursday Theology](#), we were very happy to

receive the following thoughtful response from Bruce T. Martin, who is a frequent Crossings writer. We are grateful for the light he casts on the “face of God” metaphor on which that sermon hinged, and we expect you will be similarly grateful.

Peace and Joy,
Carol Braun, for the editorial team

Dear Editorial Team,

I am writing in response to the recent sermon “Seeing the Face of God” (TT #782). As one who has been a self-aware Christian for at least fifty years, I do not think that I am alone in admitting that I have never, in those fifty years, seen “the face of God.” Nor have I ever met one who did, or even claimed to.

Along with another Crossings writer, I agree that there is a substantial difference between dogma and kerygma, between what the Church teaches (to explain faith) and what the Church proclaims (to engender or strengthen faith); and that the Church’s dogma only exists for faithful proclamation. I fear that our preacher has exaggerated the kerygma to such an extent that the Church’s dogma on the limit of faith has been obscured.

I have also had experiences not unlike the one that our preacher attests. But I do not explain them as “seeing the face of God.” These experiences of faith and love are very intense and personal. They cry out to God in faith, and feel in the flesh God’s reflective love in and among our fellow Christ-trusters. Such experiences are what Luther called the “conversation and consolation” of the faithful. Even here the Word of God is central, being grasped by faith alone. Luther called God’s works in creation (the old creation, that is) “masks” in order to

prevent any form of self-righteous works or idolatry. Faith sees through the masks, not to see God himself, but to see his works and to experience their impact as from God. Faith and love are for the “night,” not for the “day.” To use an analogy: stargazing is a wonderful experience, but one should never stargaze during the day.

In the Book of Revelation, “seeing the face of God” is of course an anthropomorphic metaphor, but one that sets forth the proper distinction between “faith” and “sight.” In the New Heaven and New Earth, yet to come, where God himself is the only light available, faith gives way to sight, and sin and death are no more. Such “sight” is unavailable to anticipatory faith in the here and now. For us, living in the unmasked light of God remains always a promise, the trusting of which we call faith but not sight. “Sight” is a metaphor we reserve for a sinless existence yet to come. Which makes me wonder why our preacher has made sight into a present possibility. The only explanation I can think of is that the experience of faith and love he eloquently described was somehow worthy of this high-value expression. But is it? Is any possible experience really something more than faith and love? It seems to me that the apocalyptic “sight” metaphor is far too weighty for any earthly experience to bear, and that using it so mundanely not only devalues faith but effectively removes the great promise yet to come.

Though he wasn’t present to witness the powerful experience he tells, the preacher claimed that he himself “saw the face of God”. Does a second-hand retelling of an experience count as an actual experience? (But I won’t quibble with that.) With this metaphor, he no doubt wished to convey that in the here and now (in the loving act he described) Christ himself was present, faith was at work, and that God himself was among the suffering providing comfort in gospel-words and in the flesh. The question

is, Does using the expression “seeing the face of God” adequately or even accurately summarize these kerygmatic ideas? Isn’t faith-in-Christ (and the love-of-Christ as faith’s real-life consequence) the adequate and accurate description of what is going on here? Going beyond Christ (who for us is always the Crucified One) to the unmasked God is, I submit, going too far in our preaching (because we wouldn’t like Who we “saw”). And, if I may say so, it not only makes Christians like me wonder about the adequacy of our experiences but causes non-Christians to shake their heads in impossible wonderment. I’d like to prevent that. [I am well aware of the several distinctions made between the Hidden and Revealed God, but here I am simply working with the notion of the masks of creation and would not like to unmask God at all.]

Now, one might be inclined to accept the “face of God” metaphor if it were not for the Book of Revelation upon which it is ostensibly based. After all, if God himself is present in his Word, then the whole God is present (even if hiddenly), and the “face of God” could be an adequate metaphor. But this will always be in the context of God’s suffering presence among us, and nothing to “glory” in (except of course by faith in the Crucified). But in the Book of Revelation, faith gives way to sight and suffering and death is no more. This is the promise that faith conveys. In the New Heaven and New Earth, we will see the glory of God and not die, forevermore.

My appeal, based on the application of the Church’s dogma (the limit to faith) to the Church’s kerygma, is to reserve “faith-in-Christ” and the “love-of-Christ” for the cruciformed here and now, and to reserve “seeing the face of God” for the promised tomorrows yet to come.

Peace and Joy,
Bruce T. Martin

#782 Seeing the face of God

This week we bring you a sermon on Revelation 22-23 delivered by fellow editorial-team member Steve Albertin to his congregation in Zionsville, Indiana, last month. In this sermon, he meditates on the notion of seeing the face of God—not just on the last day, but in the here and now.

Peace and Joy,
Carol Braun, for the editorial team

“SEEING THE FACE OF GOD”
Revelation 21:10, 22-22:5
Easter 6 C
May 5, 2013

Christ Church
The Lutheran Church of Zionsville
Rev. Dr. Steven E. Albertin

The recent search for the terrorists who exploded the bombs at the Boston Marathon was stuck and going nowhere until the authorities decided to release to the public pictures of the suspects. They hoped that someone would recognize their faces and tip off the FBI. It worked and within hours both of the suspects were off the streets.

Each person's face is unique. Our face helps to reveal who we are. We try put on a good face when we want to impress someone. Nothing reveals our broken hearts like a sad face. If you have ever seen a list of the FBI's Ten Most Wanted Criminals, you see

pictures of their faces and not their feet. Even the most revolutionary social networking tool of our times is called *FACE...book*. Nothing grabs the attention of a crowd like a pretty face. A disapproving glance can make us shrivel in shame. A gracious smile can make us glow with confidence.

It is especially important to be able to see the faces of our loved ones when we are in danger, alone or afraid. When our world is falling apart, when we are lost in a strange city, when we have lost a big game, been rejected by someone we thought we could trust or suddenly received the diagnosis we feared, we long to see the faces of the ones we love. The face of our parent, our friend, our spouse, brings the comfort we so desperately need.

It is to that kind of situation that today's Second Reading speaks. Written in secret code language to comfort suffering and persecuted Christians at the end of the first century, Revelation assures its readers that even though their end is near, even though they feel frightened and alone, their future is in God's hands. Even though they feel unclean and excluded from Jerusalem, even though they feel locked out and unable to scale the high walls designed to keep out the unworthy and unwanted, they can look forward to that day when the gates will be opened, the walls will be breached and they at last will be welcomed into the heavenly Jerusalem.

All will be well.

It will be as if they have returned to the perfection of the Garden of Eden. Water will flow in "the river of life. They will eat of "tree of life" from which humanity had been forbidden to eat ever since God banished Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden.

Most of all, on that coming day God's people will at last get to

see “the face of God.” No longer will this world hide and obscure the presence of God. No longer will we have to live by faith and not by sight. No longer will the suffering and death that so riddle our lives make us doubt that God is on our side.

With a message like this, it should not be surprising that we read passages like today’s Second Reading beside the deathbed, in the hospital, on the battlefield, and at the cemetery—when the circumstances of life most contradict the loving promises of God. The promises of the Book of Revelation assure us that finally in the sweet by-and-by we will get to see God face-to-face. When we do, it will be the best face on which we will have ever laid our eyes.

Promises like this can reinforce the assumption that Christian faith is all about dying and going to heaven. Christian faith is certainly about the promise of eternity, but the Christian faith also promises to give us a glimpse of the heavenly Jerusalem already here and now. Already now, we have a foretaste of the feast to come. Already now, we get to see God face-to-face.

This is a true story. This actually happened a month ago. The heavenly Jerusalem appeared in the midst of darkness and death. The Lamb who was slain has begun his reign. The River of Life flowed. The Tree of Life healed the sick and broken. I saw the face of God.

Her name is Susan Clark. She lives in Fort Wayne. She is my wife’s best friend. She is dying of cancer.

A month ago she returned from the hospital where she had received the results from what had seemed to be an endless number of dehumanizing medical tests. The results were not good. She and her husband had every reason to be discouraged. When she walked into her home, she realized that she had a message on her phone. She listened. It was a voice that brought back memories

from a far different time in her life.

For years she had worked together with my wife in a special pre-school for at-risk children called Hand-In-Hand. Many of the children came from homes where they were neglected and abused. Few had fathers. Many were being raised by their grandparents. All were deprived. Everyone wanted to be loved.

It was the voice of Billy. Billy was the mother of one of Sue's former students, Essie. For much of the time while Essie was in Hand-In-Hand, Billy was in and out of jail. Billy had several children all from different men. Grandma mostly raised Essie. Through the years Billy would occasionally call Sue sharing her woes and updating her on Essie. But they had not talked for some time. Now she had called again. Billy's voice announced, "Miz Clark, mah Essie's in the hospital."

Sue was worried. Essie was only 14 years old. What had happened? The next day Sue and her husband (who also drove the van that picked up the students for Hand-In-Hand and knew Essie) went to the hospital to visit Essie not knowing what to expect. Walking to her room, they realized that she was in the maternity ward. When they got to the room, there she was lying in her bed alone, without a newborn baby at her side, grief on her face and darkness in her soul. Between them and the bed was her mother, Billy, who abruptly quipped with disgust, "Miz Clark, Essie done got herself in trouble." She then reported that Essie had gotten pregnant. Upon delivery the baby had died from so many birth defects. Essie laid there listening to her mother report her sins, crying and grief stricken. It was as if her world had come to an end.

But that is not what Sue saw. All she saw was the little Essie she had in school, now older but still just a fourteen-year-old little girl who looked as if the world has just chewed her up

and spit her out. As Sue later told her family, "I did not know what else to do, but I wanted her to remember that Mrs. Clark told her that Jesus loves her."

Then, with tenderness and compassion, her own body ravaged and weakened by disease and failed chemotherapy, she crawled into the hospital bed with the grieving Essie, held her tightly in her arms and sang, "Jesus loves me this I know."

When Sue told Ann and me this story, I knew that I had heard and seen something special. Sue would have downplayed what she had done. She was just doing what she had always done. Why would she should not do that now? Her cancer did not mean that she had to stop sharing the hope and the love that Jesus had put in her heart. Jesus had not stopped loving the world dying on his cross, why should she on hers?

That day in the hospital room, the vision so vividly portrayed in today's Second Reading, was fulfilled. The heavenly Jerusalem descended. The River of Life flowed. The Tree of Life bore fruit. In the midst of this sin-scarred world, Essie and Billy walked in the Garden of Eden. They had seen God face-to-face.

I do not know if Essie and Billy realized it, but they certainly had been blessed. They had seen not just Susan Clark, but Jesus—revealed in Sue's love for someone who surely did not deserve to be welcomed into the heavenly Jerusalem. As Bessie lay in her bed, she must have felt unclean, unwanted, and undeserving. She must have felt that she had been locked out of the heavenly city. The walls must have seemed a hundred feet high. She must have felt like Adam and Eve forever prevented from ever eating from the Tree of Life.

But that day in a hospital room in Fort Wayne, just as it happens all over this world when the love of Jesus graces and soothes the bodies and souls of this sin-sick world, when water

is poured and the cross of Jesus is marked on the foreheads of sinners, when the grieving and discouraged hear that “This is the body of Christ given for you ... This is the blood of Christ shed for you,” when we are assured through a song, a conversation, a warm, tight hug, “Jesus loves me this I know,” we have seen God...face-to-face.

#781 The Awards Ceremony Address You Wish Your Child Might Have Heard

Colleagues,

For this week's offering we need you to open the attached PDF file. We got this from Cathy Lessmann of the Crossings office, who got it from it from Andrew Mueller, a graduating senior at Lutheran High School North in St. Louis. It's a copy of a typewritten manuscript produced by his father, Pr. Richard E. Mueller of Atonement Lutheran Church, Florissant, Missouri, for a recent speech at the school's annual awards ceremony. I'm sure there's software available for stripping text from a PDF document and making it available for other applications, but we don't have it and can't take time right now to look for it; so we'll hope instead that that all of you will be able to read the PDF file. If not, take a moment to download [Adobe's Acrobat Reader](#).

We'll let Pr. Mueller's words speak for themselves, with two quick notes. First, we send it to you with Pr. Mueller's

permission. Second, if you wonder why he takes pains to underscore that he's not preaching a sermon, the answer is that he's an ELCA pastor (ex-LCMS) speaking at a school that follows LCMS rules about who's allowed to preach and who is not. No comment.

Peace and Joy,
Jerry Burce, for the editorial team

[Senior Assembly Keynote Speech](#)

#780 The teacher's calling, especially in a parochial school

Colleagues,

We apologize. You looked for this on Thursday or Friday. Saturday came, and it still wasn't there. Now it's Monday, and we're only now getting ready to shoot it off to you.

We: Carol Braun, overburdened teacher at a girls' academy in the Hudson Valley, currently caught in the crush of extra responsibilities that attend the end of a school year; and yours truly, madly prepping for some forthcoming duties in South Africa while juggling a couple of other major projects as well, one of which is the job that pays. Ah, well. We will bank on

your godly patience this week, if not on your indulgence.

I trolled files again and found something from 1996 that hard-pressed teachers might find of interest. It will apply by extension to anyone else who works in a church-based version of an activity or enterprise that is common to secular settings too. Teacher Carol found a sliver of time to give it a glance yesterday and thought it apropos “especially at this time of year when teachers everywhere are sitting through commencement ceremonies and meditating on the ultimate purposes of our jobs, and on how we can do better next year at fulfilling those ultimate purposes.”

With that endorsement, here it is, a set of thoughts I threw together for the faculty retreat that launched the 1996/97 work year for Messiah Lutheran School, the Pre-K through Grade 8 institution that my congregation operates in Fairview Park, Ohio, on the western border of the city of Cleveland. As I look at it again seventeen years later, I wonder if it didn’t cause a few pairs of eyes to glaze over at the time. It’s not light reading, by any means, nor does it make for easy listening. Then again, I can’t imagine that Thursday Theology readers are looking for the light and easy. With that in mind, have at it.

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

Taking the God’s-Eye View

Theses on our vocation as servants of the Word of God
at Messiah School.

1. Let us not think of ourselves too highly. To be a servant of the Word of God is a universal condition of being alive

and human. To draw so much as a single breath is to serve the life-giving command of the Giver of breath.

2. The servants of the Word of God come in all sizes, shapes, and conditions. Among the latter are the conditions of good and bad, or more precisely, obedient and rebellious.
3. The servants of the Word of God may also be categorized as witting and unwitting. St. Louis of France is an example of the former. Cyrus of Persia illustrates the latter. The ordering and governing Word of God is nonetheless served by both.
4. There is surely a measure of coincidence and correspondence between wit and obedience; though to be sure, some unwitting servants do a better job of obeying the Word of God than those who know better. Even so, the rule holds that the better one knows, the better one serves. Hence St. Paul's emphasis on the renewal of one's mind.
5. The key difference between a baptized, confessing parochial school teacher and an agnostic public school teacher is not that one is a servant of the Word of God while the other is not, but rather that the one acknowledges what he or she is while the other does not. In so acknowledging, the former is better equipped to serve well than is the latter.
6. Baptized, confessing public school teachers—among them are some of our brothers and sisters at Messiah—presumably share with their parochial school colleagues the advantage of knowing who they are. Presumably they also labor under the disadvantage of not being free to own up to it.
7. I take it for granted that some parochial school teachers are cannier about the Word of God and what service to it entails than are others. Once again the former are in a better position than the latter to serve well, with greater confidence, deeper joy, and less confusion of

priorities.

8. To be a canny servant of the Word is to recognize that one's identity and calling are defined and shaped in two quite different ways, on the one hand by the Law of God and on the other hand by the Holy Gospel.
9. The Law of God, simply put, is the means by which God sustains his present creation. As such it is the necessary and wonderful source of life. Paradoxically it also and necessarily has a deadly effect on those who are bound and determined to flout it. That includes us all.
10. The Gospel of God, simply put, is the promise that because of Jesus Christ God is bound and determined not to let the Law's deadly effect on us be the final period at the end of our several biographies. So it is that Jesus Christ is the Way, the Truth, and the Life.
11. Messiah teachers are servants of the Law. I submit (provisionally) that this is their first and most pressing responsibility, to serve the Law well. Another way of putting this is to say that unless Messiah School does an excellent job of equipping its students to serve God well in this world, it ought to go out of business and let God's public school servants do the job for us.
12. The other side of this coin is that the existence of Messiah School is predicated on the assumption that Messiah's teachers can teach reading, writing, arithmetic—and, let us add, computing—as well as their public counterparts, with the added fillip that they are free to convey the deepest and truest reason for the skills of reading, writing, and computing, i.e. that God might be glorified and the neighbor loved well.
13. Those who serve the Law do well to remember St. Paul's dictum that the Law breeds wrath. This happens both directly and indirectly. Witness reactions to report cards—or professional evaluations—both good and bad.

Wrathful outbreaks will provoke neither surprise nor aggrieved distress in canny servants of the Law

14. A corollary observation is that the more pressing the Law, the more flagrant the wrath. This is one reason for keeping rules to a necessary minimum.
15. Messiah's teachers are likewise servants of the Gospel, this by virtue of their baptism into the death of Christ and the provoking of faith in that same Christ which the Spirit has worked within them.
16. To serve the Gospel is to speak and to act on the assumption that its incredible promise is trustworthy with respect not only to oneself but also to one's students, one's colleagues, one's set of parents or parishioners, one's neighbors.
17. The Gospel does not abrogate or supersede the Law. Rather it transcends it. It is not, for example, an excuse to do away with grades and expectations. It is rather an invitation to love and honor each other (to say nothing of God) without reference to those grades and expectations, and exclusively for Christ's sake.
18. Canny servants of the Gospel recognize that this invitation is unthinkably difficult to accept. It therefore bears endless repeating, in both word and deed. Where and when the repetition takes root, one is obliged to give thanks and praise to God for a miracle.
19. In their capacity as servants of the Gospel, it is not the responsibility of Messiah's teachers to convert their students—or anyone else, for that matter. Rather, one's responsibility begins and ends with the speaking and conveying of that which one trusts, in Christ, to be true.
20. Tangentially: whereas the drive in secular education is to inculcate self-esteem, the wiser and vastly truer move in parochial education is to inculcate the conviction, unthinkable apart from Christ, that one is esteemed by

God.

21. Such inculcation begins with believing the unbelievable about oneself. It is therefore necessary that servants of the Gospel should constantly hear the Gospel addressed to them.
22. It is true in general that the Church's only unique gift and contribution to the world is the Gospel. It is likewise true that the Gospel is the sole excuse for parochial education.

Jerome Burce

August, 1996

#779 Musings on Ministry and the Holy Spirit

Colleagues,

Being under the gun this week, and having already conspired with co-editor Carol Braun to dose you twice with more of Ed Schroeder, I trolled old files of my own and came up with this. It's a snippet of a paper I wrote as a DMin student in the early '90s. The task was to articulate one's "working theology of Christian ministry." So charged, I followed the lead of old teachers like Ed, turned to the Augsburg Confession, and took it from there. Here is the first of four theses—"confessional principles," as I described them in the paper—that emerged from that exercise. It seems germane today to reflection about Pentecost, the question being, why and to what end is the Holy Spirit kicking up all that fuss in the ancient Jerusalem of Acts

2? Of course, hard on the heels of Pentecost comes Trinity Sunday, than which no day in the entire year is less welcomed or more mangled by the Church's preaching corps. With that in view, you might find the concluding musings about kerygma and dogma to be of some interest as well. It ends, as you'll see, with a confession of sorts. I thought for a moment to cut that out, then changed my mind. Perhaps it nudges some others toward a bit of self-reflection. If so, God be praised. As for the rest of the "I's," "me's," and "my's" that litter the piece, the nature of the original exercise required them, and I'll trust you to endure them in that light.

Peace and Joy,
Jerry Burce, for the editorial team

Thesis: The purpose of Christian ministry is to provide the means by which the Holy Spirit can engender justifying faith in Christ. (AC IV, V)

This is the Pauline and Johannine conception restated, namely that ministry serves the purpose of Christ and the God who was/is in him, namely that all people should be drawn to him as believing ones, i.e. in a relationship of trust. The content of this trust is that God is entirely gracious in Christ, through Christ, because of Christ. The presence or absence of such trust is the ultimate life-and-death issue. It determines whether, in the classic parlance, a given person is justified or not; whether God opts to see in her, *propter Christum*, the precise quality that is Christ's, and to act accordingly (thus the meaning of "imputed righteousness"), or whether he chooses instead to deal with that person apart from Christ, on the basis of her own historical quality as a human being to whom the Ten Commandments apply.

Three observations:

First: I realize all too well that this reading of the purposes of God, Christ, Church and ministry will strike hordes of Christians, and among them sub-hordes of fellow Lutherans, as impossibly narrow, particularly in this latter day when synoptic Kingdom-of-God themes (too often badly read in my view) have been given a preeminent role in theological discourse. It may help somewhat to point out that this matter of the individual's justification through faith is to be conceived of not as the entirety of divine purpose (hardly!) but rather as its compelling focus in the immediacy of the ministering moment ("Now is the acceptable time!") Thus with Jesus, whose historical speaking and doing among the human beings he encounters, whether before or after the resurrection, is aimed always at provoking or enticing faith in him as the Christ and Son of God, the one who has come to seek the lost and to save them [1]; thus also and therefore with the apostles and with those who follow in their ministering succession, to the present day [2]. In this conception the eventful moment of justifying trust, discovered by God in the heart of this, that, or the other person, is the precise point in present time toward which all of God's triune acting in the past is directed. It is also the *sine qua non* of all that God intends to accomplish in the future, be this the future of tomorrow and the day after or the future of the eschaton [3]. Hence its definitive role in setting the agenda for God's ministers.

Second: it is of paramount importance to note the crucial distinction between the Holy Spirit as the effective cause of justifying faith and Christian ministry as supplier of the means by which the Spirit's work gets done. Or to put that in another, more immediate way: it is important for me as a minister to remember that my task is to summon faith in Christ, not to create it. Always the temptation is to forget this, and in so

doing to re-commit the original sin of abrogating for myself a responsibility that is God's alone. It is always easier, of course, to identify this sin in others than to confess to its presence in myself.

Third: this is an appropriate point at which to reflect on the distinction between dogma and kerygma, a matter that has come to seem increasingly important as I have practiced ministry over the years. The assertions above concerning justification by faith [4] obviously belong to the dogmatic genre. They possess the character, that is, of descriptive statements, spoken at a reflective distance as if by an observer. Their purpose is to represent the Church's distillation, over time, of the Scriptural witness concerning the speaking, doing, willing, and intending of God over against human beings, objectively and dispassionately considered. By contrast kerygma is passionate, directed speech, the purpose of which is to provoke a response in the "you" of a hearer. These two, dogma and kerygma, are necessarily related in content. On the other hand they are not and cannot be identical in content; and this, I have found, is particularly true with respect to this core issue of faith and justification. "Where God sees faith clinging to Christ, he justifies; where he fails to see it, he declines to justify." This is objective dogma. The kerygmatic counterpart: "God is ready and aching to see Christ's face in yours. That's all the excuse he needs to wrap his arms around you forever. So let him do it! Don't make him deal with you as you! You won't like that! Neither will he." Here the question of faith is implicit, as an anticipated outcome of the speaking. Were it to be made explicit, as it so often is, through a transporting of dogmatic formulations into the kerygmatic moment—"If you believe in Jesus, God will..."—then the kerygma would be ruined and the dogma violated, for the simple reason that the hearer's attention and faith would be drawn not to the trustworthy Christ but rather to

the untrustworthy percolations of her own heart. On the other hand, were the question of faith in Christ to be absent altogether as in the popular “Don’t worry! Be affirmed! God loves you for who you are!”—then the kerygma, separated entirely from the dogma, would be false, ignoring as it does in this specific instance the Scriptural witness to the wrath of God. To the reader who at this point is wondering why the great length on what seems to be so picayune and abstruse a topic, I observe that my ministry as presently called and ordered is preeminently kerygmatic in nature. As speaker and doer I am situated in the front lines, so to speak, of this all-important contention of God’s to justify the ungodly through faith evoked by the Holy Spirit in the speaking and doing *pro nobis* of Jesus Christ [5]. Clarity as to how I speak and do is therefore of the essence. When kerygmatic ministry ignores the difference between kerygma and dogma, it tends inevitably to become harsh and cruel. When it ignores the relationship between the two, on the other hand, it inclines toward vapid and saccharine emptiness [6], and this also inevitably. In both cases the resulting ministry is fundamentally untrue to the redemptive purposes of God in Christ—his aching desire (to put it metaphorically) to embrace estranged human beings in the strong arms of his good and wholesome love. I assert these things, by the way, specifically on the strength of my own experience as recipient, practitioner, and observer of the kerygmatic task. Of the two errors, ignoring the difference between dogma and kerygma and disregarding their relationship, I find myself intellectually susceptible to the former and prone in actual pastoral practice to the latter. In either case, God help me!

Notes

[1] This is an exegetical conclusion, of course, that screams for extended demonstration. The reader will forgive me, I pray, if I forego that demonstration here in the interests of

brevity and in keeping with the character of this present exercise as a personal statement of "where I am" in my thinking. As an example, however, see Mk. 2:5-6. See also Mk. 1:1, Jn. 20:31.

[2] Mt. 28: "Make disciples!"; Acts 1: "Be my witnesses!".

[3] Cf. Paul's telling (Phil. 2) of God's ultimate purposes in Christ, "...that at the name of Jesus every knee shall bow...and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father." See too the expression of these same purposes in the first three petitions of the Lord's Prayer, each of which evokes the eschatological vision of every human heart rightly related to God in a condition of unsullied trust.

[4] I use the common designation for this doctrinal nexus. In fact, I prefer the formulation "justification through faith," for the reason that this seems to do a somewhat better job of keeping faith from becoming an abstract end in itself. Cf. Will Herberg's assessment, in the late 1950's, that to hosts of religious Americans it mattered not what one believed concerning God, so long as one believed something. This is a notion that I continue to encounter frequently in my present ministry. From a New Testament perspective, of course, the faith which justifies is always and only faith in the Justifying One, i.e. Christ.

[5] Let this be noted as my understanding, at the most fundamental level, of my own present role in Christian ministry. I use the classic terminology here as a form of professional shorthand.

[6] The consequence of wishing to be all things to all people without the anchoring recollection that one is called in all things to represent Christ to all people. *Caveat*: dogmatically uninformed kerygma will also take a turn toward hardness, and if not sooner, then later. The ultimate function of dogma, after all, is to support and defend the Church's telling of the *Gospel*. No wonder, then, that where dogma is ignored, there the first and greatest casualty is the Gospel itself; and where the Gospel withers, there will thrive, as weeds in a garden, the thorns of the latest legalism.

#778 Luther as Mission Theologian

Continuing our discussion of mission, this week we bring you another piece on that subject from the files of Ed Schroeder. Ed first presented these “9.5 Theses” to the Forum of Lutheran Clergy of Metro St. Louis on Reformation Day, 2005. He sent them out to Thursday Theology readers at that time, but we think they’re well worth revisiting now as a follow-up to [last week’s post](#).

Peace and Joy,
Carol Braun, for the editorial team.

Luther as Mission Theologian – 9.5 Theses

Edward H. Schroeder

[Presentation at the Forum of Lutheran Clergy of Metro St. Louis, University Club Tower, Brentwood, MO, October 31, 2005]

Preface: Luther’s Reformation Aha!

1. Luther’s thesis #1 of the ninety-five signals his mission theology: “When our Lord and Master, Jesus Christ, said ‘Repent’ (Matt. 4:17), He called for the entire life of believers to be one of penitence.” “Mission field” is not a geographical term, but a cardiological one. The “field” is the human heart. The change signaled in the word “repent” is a change (à la Luther) in “what one’s heart is hanging onto.” Either in fear, or in love, or in trust—or some combination

of all three “verbs of the heart.” WHAT your heart is hanging on was thereby Luther’s definition for a deity. And the question then was “which god?” True god or false god? The words “mission” and “repentance,” in Christian vocabulary, signal changes in the de facto deity (and their name is legion) at the heart of the matter.

2. The goal of mission, what Jesus is calling for in Matt. 4, is expressed by St. Paul in the second lectionary lesson for two weeks ago (Oct. 16) as he reviews the mission history of the Thessalonian congregation: “how you turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God and...his Son...Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath that is coming” (1 Thess. 1:1-10). The goal of Christian mission is finally to have people change gods, to switch where their heart is hanging. That can also be true of folks who call themselves Christian. They too may—better said, regularly do—need a god-change. It all depends on what their hearts are REALLY hanging onto. If repentance is to be a daily event, then daily god-change is also in the mix—not primarily in the head, but in the heart where fears, loves, and trusts transpire. Here is where “true” fear, love, trust is constantly conflicted by “other gospels” knocking on the door.

3. At the end of his explanation to the Apostles’ Creed in the Large Catechism, Luther says, “These articles of the Creed, therefore, divide and distinguish us Christians from all other people on earth. All who are outside the Christian church [*ausser der Christenheit*], whether heathen, Turks, Jews, or false Christians and hypocrites, even though they believe in and worship only the one, true God, nevertheless do not know what his attitude is toward them. They cannot be confident of his love and blessing. They remain in eternal wrath and damnation, for they do not have the Lord Christ, and, besides, they are not illuminated and blessed by the gifts of the Holy Spirit.” Taking his cue from Romans 1 and

Acts 17, Luther clarifies what he understands about the switch that repentance/mission entails. He understands that God-encounters, yes, encounters with the one and only God there is, happen to everyone throughout history, and that a "believing" and "worshiping" response regularly ensues. However, folks never perceive "from nature" the attitude of the "one true God" to be merciful to sinners. The universal drive throughout world religions to rectify things with the deity by sacrifices corroborates that this is not known. Even to his fellow God-believing Jews Jesus has to say that God "desires mercy, not sacrifice." That is, "I, God, desire to be merciful to you, rather than you sacrificing to me" in order to patch things up between us.

What "heathen, Turks, Jews, or false Christians and hypocrites" are missing, even with their theisms, is that "they do not have the Lord Christ." Note the word "have." It's a possession thing. And when you don't have Christ (who is "had" by trusting him) you lack being "confident of God's love and blessing...[and] are not illuminated and blessed by the gifts of the Holy Spirit." You do, sadly, continue to "have" something else: "They remain in eternal wrath and damnation." To modern ears that sounds way too harsh. Definitely not nice. Yet it is no harsher than Paul's words to the Thessalonians who now "have" Jesus who "rescues us from the wrath that is coming."

4. The kind of salvation offered in the Christian Gospel is different from the salvation offered by other gospels. As S. Mark Heim has shown, differing world religions offer different salvations. "Going to heaven" is not a universal salvation offer. In fact, going to heaven is more central to the salvation offered in Islam than to the salvation offered in the Christian gospel. Buddhist Nirvana and the Kingdom of God offered by Christ do not overlap at all. And the Good News of the crucified Messiah is not focused on going to heaven either. It offers survival from divine criticism, that

God's last word for Christ-trusters is (and will forever be) mercy. And who knows what those "mansions" really look like? New Testament writers tell us very little. Might well be that they weren't all that interested. Already having God's last word about their upbeat futures, the architecture of eternity was no big deal.

5. God operates a "double mission" in the world, not just "one" *Missio Dei* as now permeates ecumenical mission theology—also in the LCMS and the ELCA. Luther's thesis #62, "The true treasure of the church is the most holy Gospel of the glory and grace of God," designates the Christic one of these two missions. But God's other "mission" in Moses still persists for those not yet covered by Christ's mission. If you think they are mostly the same—as *Missio Dei* theology tends to do—then read 2 Corinthians 3:4ff. Here Paul talks about God's old covenant and new covenant, God's old ministry and new ministry, God's two missions to the same mission field, "the tablet of human hearts." One mission kills, one makes alive. St. Paul's own Christian mission, so he claims, celebrates God's "regime change" with sinners. It is the move, first of all on God's part, from Moses to Christ, from a mission of condemnation to a mission of justification, from a lethal (though fading) glory to a permanent glory that outshines the other one to the nth degree. Christian mission aims to move people out from under lethal glory into "the glory and grace of God, that treasure of the most holy Gospel."

6. One of Luther's favored images for mission is the gospel coming into new territory as a "*Platzregen*," a thundershower, a cloudburst. That can be both good news and bad. God sends the gospel shower as a surprise, not expected, but much needed. That's good news. But if nothing grows in the soil where this rain falls, or if later the Gospel's nurture is ignored or spurned, God moves the *Platzregen* somewhere else.

Then a “famine of the Word of God” (the grim word of the prophet Amos) moves in, and parched earth is all that’s left. Bad news indeed. Does this shed light on the apparent “move” of the Christian gospel to the earth’s southern hemisphere away from the churchly north where it has been moistening for two millennia?

7. If you’re baptized, you’re a missionary. That’s the self-understood mission theology of Christians in the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus. According to the Lutheran World Federation the EECMY is the fastest growing Lutheran church in the world today. In a recent survey of new members only 8% became Christ-followers through contact with a pastor. The rest heard the Good News over the backyard fence from their neighbors. “Everybody knows” that if you’re baptized you’re a missionary. The key word is “offer.” Anyone who has received the offer can make the offer.

8. Reformation Day’s three lectionary texts spell out a sequence: Central terms—Forgiveness (God’s NEW offer in Jeremiah 31); Faith in that offer (Romans 3); Freedom, the result (John 8). Christ’s forgiveness is offered (with reference, if need be, to previous offers where people’s hearts have been hanging). Recipients are “encouraged” to shift their faith to the forgiveness offered. The upshot is freedom, freedom from the slavery (as Jesus tells his Jewish hearers) that their prior heart-hanging had not remedied. The freedom in Christ’s offer is “total freedom,” whatever that all means. One might say that John’s entire Gospel spells out the specs.

9. The USA is as much a mission field as was the Holy Roman Empire of Luther’s day, where everybody (except Jews) was baptized. But where hearts were hanging in his day was another

matter. And the penance/indulgences gospel of the day was an “other” gospel. Hearts needed to switch to the church’s true treasure. That’s mission. Today’s alternate gospels—churchly and secular—are legion. That is as true in the USA today as anywhere else in the world. These alternate gospels are being feared, loved and trusted all over the place. Also among folks who want to be Christians. Hearts need to switch lest God’s Mosaic mission have the last word.

9.5. The theology of mission is the theology of the cross. The final four theses of the ninety-five.

#92. “Away, then with those prophets [the indulgence hustlers in ML’s day, the false gospellers—churchly & secular—in our day] who say to Christ’s people, ‘Peace, peace,’ where there is no peace.”

#93. “Hail, hail to all those prophets who say to Christ’s people, ‘The cross, the cross,’ where [in the plethora of other gospels] there is no cross.”

#94. “Christians should be exhorted to be zealous to follow Christ, their Head, through penalties, deaths, and hells;”

#95. “And let them thus be more conFIDEnt [note the word “*fide*,” faith, in this term, also in Luther’s Latin] of entering heaven through many tribulations rather than through a false assurance [*securitas*] of peace.”

Edward H. Schroeder

#777 Some Uncommon Common Sense about “Mission”

Colleagues:

“Go to my brothers and say to them...” (John 20:17; Jesus to Mary Magdalene, Gospel, Easter 1). Again, “As the Father has sent me, so I send you” (John 20:21; Jesus to the disciples, Gospel, Easter 2). Etc.

Easter entails mission. The two are inseparable. This being so, we do well to take at least one Thursday of this Easter season to think about the mission that falls to people who wear and bear Christ in the world these days.

Some weeks ago Cathy Lessmann of the Crossings office sent us a little trove of unpublished pieces that Ed Schroeder had culled from his files. Most if not all were recently posted in [Ed's section](#) of the library at crossings.org. We'll ship a few of them to you even so via Thursday Theology, beginning with the one below. It hits the Easter mission theme as squarely on the head as anything you'll find anywhere. It does so, of course, in Ed's trademark style, and with his trademark clarity about the added value that the distinction between God's Law and God's Gospel brings to any discussion that's worth having in the church.

For readers younger than fifty-five, a bit of necessary background:

In 1965 a convention of the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod adopted a series of resolutions that quickly became known as “The Mission Affirmations.” They just as quickly became fuel for the fire in the controversy that eventually engendered Concordia

Seminary in Exile (Seminex) and the Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches. Persons caught in that controversy—Ed, for example—spent lots of time thinking about them. Later they faded from view, as the meager results of a Google search today will quickly reveal.

I was a seminarian in those days, and Seminex was my school. I recall a general consensus that the Mission Affirmations were the last word in right-minded thinking about mission. I also recall a conversation with a sagacious and rigorously Lutheran missionary theologian who wasn't so sure about that. Turns out that Ed wasn't so sure about it either; or else that he had second and better thoughts when he returned to them a few decades later. After all, what we're sending you today is Ed's 2004 revision of these affirmations. You'll agree, I think, that the improvement is huge. To see how huge, make sure you start by looking at [the original resolutions](#).

It's amazing how much clearer things become when you put your Law-and-Gospel glasses on. Would that more in the Church would do this.

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

Affirmations of God's Mission
Adopted by The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod
(1965)
Variations proposed by Edward H. Schroeder, Jan.
27, 2004

I. The Church Is God's Mission.[RSV = Revised Schroeder Version] The Church is Created by God's "NEW" mission to

the world, God's unique mission in Christ.

The Church is both the product of God's new mission in Christ to God's old world, and thereafter its agent. God sends Christ on a MERCY mission to God's own broken world. The depth of that brokenness is God's "other" deal with the human race—first articulated in Gen. 2:17, first enacted in Gen. 3:8ff. In this old mission mercy is hidden. Instead God "counts trespasses." No sinner survives such arithmetic. In Christ's death and resurrection God offers these same sinners mercy, call it forgiveness of sins. God re-connects with them as Abba. A simple definition of church is "Church = Christ-trusting sinners." All talk of Christian mission is grounded here.

II. **The Church Is Christ's Mission to the Whole World[RSV]
Christ sends that church to replicate its Christ-trusting
throughout the world, where God's other arithmetic is all-
pervasive.**

There is no technical NT term for mission as we use that word today. Closest is the language of God's "covenant" or again, God's "serving." The Greek technical terms in the NT are **diatheke** and **diakonia**. But the way that God does covenant-service **in Christ** is very different from his alternate covenant-service apart from Christ. These two covenant-service-projects are grounded in two very different—finally contradictory—words from God. St John differentiates them as God's "law coming through Moses" and God's "grace and truth coming through Jesus Christ" (1:17). St. Paul and other NT writers use other contrasting terms for these two **covenant-service-projects**. [Hereafter CSP.]

Thus God's old CSP is as different from God's new CSP as night from day, as life from death. There is no "generic" CSP that covers both. Thus they must be specified, distinguished. It is always God's new CSP in Christ that

rescues sinners from God's old CSP with its bad-news bottom line for sinners. Christ sends his trusters to replicate for worldlings what he has done for them, namely Christ's own CSP. To wit, to offer them the promise of Christ's own cross and resurrection so that they too might move from God's old CSP to God's new one. St. John quotes Christ as saying: "As the Father sent me, so send I you."

III. **The Church Is Christ's Mission to the Church[RSV stet]**

Even though Christ-trusters are already "churchified," they need constant nurture. For within their lives they too sense the "old Adam/Eve" present—and operational. "Lord I believe, help my unbelief" is the standard, not the exceptional, admission of all Christ-trusters. In the language of the Smalcald Articles, they constantly meet this need in one another with "mutual conversation and consolation." In short, they continue to offer the crucified and risen Christ to each other, so that "repenting and believing the Good news" AGAIN AND AGAIN becomes the daily regimen of Christ-trusters. [This is perhaps the most important ecumenical phrase in the Lutheran Confessions. There are no barricades of any sort for any Christ-truster in practicing this "means of grace" (so Smalcald) with anyone who claims Christ as Lord.]

IV. **The Church is Christ's Mission to the Whole Society[RSV] The Church carries Christ's Mercy-Mission to the Whole Society conscious that God's other CSP is already in operation there. That has required Christ-trusters of every age to see society with binocular vision, lest either of God's two covenant-service-projects gets short shrift.**

Apart from Christ, God has from the beginning been at work in human society with his initial CSP. As wondersome as that CSP is—yes, good and gracious—it does not bring mercy

to sinners. It preserves and cares for creation, yes. But forgiveness of sinners, no. The sinners dilemma is healed only in the new CSP grounded in Good Friday and Easter. It is definitely something else. Ask any forgiven sinner.

Articulating that distinction for Christians in society is crucial for both CSPs to proceed well. Lutheran language has capitalized on the Biblical metaphors of God's left and right hands. Not two different realms (as territories), but God's two different operations on the same turf, in the one and only world there is.

Christ-trusters, even before they encounter Christ, already have assignments in God's "old" CSP, God-given assignments as caretakers, stewards, in God's world. Such assignments arise already at human birth whereby God places people into specific spots in his creation. And along with that placement come multiple callings from God to "be my sort of person in all the relationships wherein I've placed you." When human beings also become Christ-connected, they get a second assignment: "Replicate your Christ-connection, offer Christ's redemption, in all the relationships you already have in your initial CSP." A frequently used collect in the liturgy says it thus: "We dedicate our lives to the care and redemption of all that you [God] have made." Care and redemption are two distinct jobs, not at all synonyms. Yet, the two come from the same God, and both become the assignments for every Christ-truster.

V. **The Church Is Christ's Mission to the Whole Man[RSV] The Church Is Christ's Mission to the Whole Person—but not forgetting the 2 CSP distinction**

Biblical anthropology does not divide humans into body and soul. [Greeks in NT times majored in that point of view.]

Bible language sees people made of distinct components, yes, but as one unified whole person no member of which is superior to the other. The Biblical focus is on relationships. How is this unitary, though multi-membered, person related to significant others in his/her God-given placements? That is the question.

The root relationship, of course, is someone's God-relationship. Where that is fractured, only God's right-hand CSP will do the job to bring healing. In all other relationships—with other humans, with one's own self, with other creatures, with creation as a whole—God's other hand is at work to care for and preserve what's already created. Christians use the language of "social ministry, medical missions, inner mission," etc. when they engage in such left-hand work. Such terms also apply to those who do not know Christ at all but are deeply involved in this CSP of God.

Designating such missions and ministries "left-hand" is in no way derogatory. Those tasks are divine assignments, godly work. Labeling them "left-hand" is descriptive. It describes what God is achieving there, that is, caring for creation. That is not yet redemption. Left-hand CSP does not translate sinners into Christ-trusters.

In executing God's right-hand CSP Christ-trusters concretely offer the crucified and risen Christ to the receivers, God's offer of merciful forgiveness encountered nowhere else in creation. Right-hand CSP is more than just speaking or offering "God's love." God's love is already operating wherever God extends his left hand.

The right-hand CSP is an offer of Christ's specific mercy-promise to folks who, for whatever reason, do not trust

it, so that they may trust it. That offer occurs in concrete words and worded actions (sacraments) designated as “means of grace.” The Smalcald Articles specify five such word/actions that transmit this promise. They are visible, audible. You can record them when they are happening.

God’s left hand CSP—also assigned by God to folks who do not trust Christ—protects, preserves, restores the other relationships mentioned above. Christians have no scruples in joining God’s other left-handed workers in this operation. In fact, Christ commends it.

VI. The Whole Church is Christ’s Mission.[RSV] All Members of the Church are on assignment in both of God’s Missions.

If you are alive at all, you are God’s left-hand missionary. If in addition you also trust Christ, you have a second mission assignment as well, God’s CSP number 2. To be baptized is to be a CSP-2 missionary. When the congregation prays that offertory prayer IN UNISON, it is “all of us” who “dedicate our lives to the care and redemption of all that you, God, have made.” All means all. Working out the strategies in any given place and time for this double mission of care and redemption is a major piece of the agenda when the Christ-connected gather for “mutual conversation and consolation.” The overarching rubric is that none of God’s TWO Covenant-Service-Projects suffer loss.

All members of the church urge people to trust Christ. That finally amounts to urging people to switch gods, to “hang their hearts” (Luther’s phrase) on Christ, to abandon whatever their hearts have been trusting before. That is what St. Paul proclaimed to his audience on Mars Hill: “You worship many gods here in Athens. I urge you to

switch. Hang your hearts on the one that is still unknown to you, the Christ whom God raised from the dead.” Christians do the same thing on today’s Mars Hill where other gospels abound. In doing so they do not argue that their gospel is the best. Rather their claim is that it is Good News, an offer both “good” and “new” that they too had never heard before. Nor have they heard it elsewhere on the Mars Hills of today. They seek to extend the same offer to others. They urge them to trust it.

#776 The Preacher’s Audience: Participation in the Mystery

We were glad to receive the following thoughtful response to [Thursday Theology #775](#). It comes to us from Bill Burrows, professor of missiology at the New York Theological Seminary, former president of the American Society of Missiology, and keynote speaker at the Third International Crossings Conference in 2010. As he explained to me in a short prefatory note, Bill writes this response in order to “amplify some things Robert Shultz said” in the original ThTh posting, and to add “a Catholic sacramental perspective on one of the essential aspects of joining in Eucharistic worship.”

To the rest of our readers, a reminder that we welcome your participation in this ongoing discussion. Send your thoughts to cabraun98ATaolDOTcom.

Peace and Joy,
Carol Braun, for the editorial team

Millions of gallons of ink have been spread on billions of acres of paper as Catholics and Lutherans have argued over whose theology of the Eucharist is right. I tend to think that it's a question of differing wisdoms pointing to different aspects of truth deeper than words can describe. In that spirit, I offer a thought on the relationship of the sermon or homily to a community's participation in worship.

In both our traditions, the liturgy of the Word and of the sacrament are integral to the entire act of worship. At the time of the Second Vatican Council, when I first began to think through what it means to *participate* in worship, I read something (probably in the work of the eminent German Benedictine liturgist [1886 – 1948] Odo Casel) that has stuck with me. Casel, perhaps more than any scholar of ancient liturgy, unearthed the relationship between the Christian Eucharistic celebration of the Mystery of our salvation in Christ and the way in which Greek and Roman mystery cults were celebrated. He is both feted and roasted for what he made of this research, but few have been able to refute the fundamental insight. The genius of early Christian worship was its wedding of elements of Jewish sacred meals as memorials that represented archetypal salvation-historical events (the Exodus, as the prime example) with the sacrifice of Christ on Calvary and the deep cultural roots of celebrating (pagan) mysteries that were believed to re-enact one kind or another of primordial transformation or entrée to a state of gnosis.

Okay, we all know what happened with gnosticism and the battles to differentiate its fantastical worldview from the rugged historical realism of both the faith and rituals of Judaism and the fundamental faith of Christianity. In both Jewish and Christian faith, we celebrate God's total involvement in the

real, earth-shaking and renewing events of Exodus, bestowal of Torah, Calvary, the Resurrection, and Pentecost. If I may cut to the chase, in the liturgy of the Word, the Christian is brought to consider the life, death, teaching, resurrection, and presence of the Lord in oneself and the community; taught to apply this to oneself; brought to confess one's unworthiness; and to entrust oneself to the mercy of God. All this in the company of one's family and one's faith community gathered together to do what? Worship? Of course. But what is the supreme worship of the Christian? To join Christ in offering oneself to God, joining the paschal *transitus* of the Lord with feelings of gratitude (*eucharistein*) for having been created, forgiven, and re-created. And doing this in the context of the liturgical action of blessing bread that by the power of the Spirit becomes the body of the Lord, blessing wine that becomes his blood by the same Spirit. Eating it and drinking it as a symbol of one's total trust in the promise of the gospel that the Lord is food and drink for our paschal *transitus*.

In my life I have known several celebrants who have understood the unity of the liturgy of the Word and of the Eucharist. Each has given homilies that have in one way or another mined the scriptures for the elements that the Crossings Community has brought into relief. Their homilies have invited the congregation to commune with the Lord in his total act of trust to the Father, our sacramental act being both a memorial of his death and resurrection and a preparation for the ultimate act of trust, dying physically with the Lord.

Sermons easily degenerate into moralizing. A good homily, on the other hand, is an act in which the homilist/celebrant helps the congregation to remember who we are in relation to Christ and to participate with the Lord in the great Mystery of salvation. Which is the reason every leader of worship, who is given the role of being the Spirit's agent in bringing the congregation to

mindfulness, needs to pray before preparing the homily and leading worship.

Bill Burrows

wrburrowsAToptonlineDOTnet

Cortlandt Manor, NY

#775 The Preacher's Audience: Some Give and Take

Colleagues,

I've got to call him something, so I'll pick Fred, Fred after the late great Danker whose feistiness he shares. [Five weeks ago](#) we published a set of theses that Robert C. Schultz had penned in response to a couple of pieces that appeared last November. Two days later Fred, a lay theologian, sent along some thoughts he had scribbled out while reading. They were interleaved with Bob's text. We shot them off to Bob, who got back us the next day or so with the following:

"Thank you for sending [Fred]'s reflections. It seems to me that they are quite appropriate responses to what I posted. In that respect, the theses are having a desired effect. I say that without agreeing with everything that he says, but I think that what he calls stream-of-consciousness is really what thinking is all about. If [Fred]'s responses are at times more open about his feelings than is common in Crossings circles, that is also a contribution."

In light of that, what could we do except send Fred's thoughts

along so you could read them too? Here they are to chew on and enjoy, bubbling up in italics between the lines of Bob's prose and at the end, a passionate coda of sorts. If they should get you scribbling in turn, we hope you'll make like Fred and hit the send button too.

Peace and Joy,
Jerry Burce, for the editorial team

1. In reflecting on the comments made by [Burce on November 24](#) and by [Schroeder on November 8](#), I have formulated some theses for discussion of the role of pastoral diagnosis in sermon preparation.
2. The Crossings method is a useful method for the study of a text.
3. The Crossings method may not be as useful in the preparation of a sermon.

Therefore a different approach/method is needed.

4. The distinction between the study of a text and the preparation of a sermon is an important distinction.
5. The Crossings method focuses on identifying the person in the text who has the problem.

And on a bit more than that too!

6. The sermon is focused on the need of those who will hear the sermon.

I.e., the Problem those people have? Need = Problem?

7. Those present in the congregation have come to worship God. The sermon is a helpful element of worship but is not essential in such a way that worship cannot occur if there

is no sermon.

People have come to worship God? That's a given? Hardly. They are here to feel good about themselves. To get some religio-jollies. To demonstrate how righteous they are. To confess. To beg forgiveness. To meet someone's expectations; even if only their own. To sing because they feel good about singing. Lots of reasons. Not mostly to do with "worship." Question: Without death and resurrection—Preached Word—is it even possible to "worship God"?

8. The preacher focuses on the need(s) of those who will hear the sermon rather than on the need of one individual—which requires pastoral care.

I.e., "Preacher is to focus on common need, not individual problem... a skill which requires discernment."

9. In determining the need which the sermon will address, the preacher seeks to identify a common need of the people who will gather for worship—as part of their worship they will hear and reflect on the sermon.

The songs are sung. The scriptures are heard. The prayers are prayed. The sins are confessed, the penitent is absolved. The sermon is "reflected upon"?? "Oh, Pastor did a nice job today...wasn't that nice. Who brought the donuts?" Crossings teaches us, if nothing else, that the preached word is living and powerful. It brings us to death and raises us in Christ. It throws away our religious crutches and leaves us bravely looking out at the world, seen rightly for once, from the safe arms of Jesus-God himself. Reflect that!

10. The worship of some members may be more enriched by other

elements of the service, for example, by meeting their need to worship in a group, by the administration of the sacraments, or by reinforcing their identity as members of this group of worshippers.

If the Preached Word is not happening, pampering your “need” to worship in a group, to have identity there...it’s just idolatry! Likewise the sacraments. They are Preached Word Enacted, and if the Preached Word is not happening in and through the sacraments, are the sacraments really even Sacraments or just the Lutheran flag-waving over grape juice and bread cubes?

11. For diagnostic purposes, the common need of members of a group gathered for worship can be compared to an epidemic in which there is a common problem even though the symptoms of each individual may differ.

I.e., “We have sinned against you in thought, word and deed, by what we have done and by what we have failed to do. We have not loved you with our whole heart, we have not loved our neighbor as ourselves...etc.” Robert, it’s called Sin. A nice easy three-letter word. Use a capital letter so we all know you’re not talking about sins.

12. Diagnostic skill is measured by the accurate identification of the epidemic as the cause of the symptoms.

A “Pastor” could exist who doesn’t realize that Sin is the problem?

13. Therapeutic skill is measured by the treatment of the underlying illness of the epidemic.

I.e., to be useful, a pastor needs to tackle the Sin problem and not just the “I’m so depressed, selfish,

anxious, and apathetic!" problem. Fair enough.

14. Conversion of symptoms of one kind into symptoms of another kind may be helpful but is management rather than therapy. For example, converting unbelief, shame, or guilt into some other spiritual problem may be helpful but does not resolve the underlying problem.

What is he talking about? How could pushing the tumors out into the bloodstream be a good idea? Helpful? Helpful in feeling good about ourselves so we can get back to "worshiping" God again?

15. In the organization of the congregations that we individually serve as pastors, the pastor begins his preparation for the sermon with the task of identifying these symptoms in the people who will hear the sermon and diagnosing them as having a common source.

So job #1 for the man or woman who will hold forth the Preached Word is to notice that our problems come from Sin? This is too good!

16. This common source of these symptoms, that is, the epidemic, is described as law in the Lutheran Confessions.

And the problem is not Sin. It's law, Lutheranly understood. The Lex is the reason we have not loved God with our whole heart, nor our neighbors as ourselves. Ok, fair enough. I could make some hay here.

17. The symptoms of the experience of the law presented by members of the congregation are manifold.

The Lex operates and that's why we're taking it on the nose, one and all.

18. The New Testament uses a rich variety of images in describing these varied symptoms of people's actual experience of the work of the law.

The New Testament has lots of images (parables?) for how the Lex attacks people. Knocking out their religious crutches might not be one of them.

19. The Book of Concord similarly refers to a variety of images and their accompanying symptoms without ranking them.

Ditto the Lutheranly writings.

20. The symptoms of the work of the law that are described in the text and/or that may predominate in the preacher's personal experience may (or may not) coincide with the symptoms experienced by the persons described in the text (or by the preacher).

Eh? The Symptoms of Lex described in the text may or may not coincide with the Symptoms (of Lex?) experienced by the persons described in the text? Do I read aright? Is he trying to say that sometimes what the text alludes to (or what Sabbatheology Gurus write about) has nothing to do with what the pastor or the people need to hear?

21. The problem to be addressed in the sermon is the problem experienced by a significant number (not necessarily all) of the people who will hear the sermon.

I.e., so preach toward a problem that most people have or at least have heard about, and forget about the Preached Word. "I'm doing pretty well. Why in the world would I need the Preached Word to disrupt my prosperous little parsonage?"

Pushback Theses

- The Lex is part of the fabric of this world.
- It deceives and seduces, accuses and lies. It declares, if only you were such and such, this and that, you'd be okay.
- The world has swallowed these lies hook, line, and sinker. From the youngest iteration of Old Adam and Old Eve to the largest hegemonic powers of this planet, we believe our okay-ness depends upon our righteousness, religiousness, performance, achievement, attainment, commitment...the list is long and ridiculous. We love it and ride the roller coaster of success, pride, failure, guilt, fear, despair, and denial.
- But, you won't believe it, the Lex is a lie!
- Your okay-ness is already accomplished because Jesus Christ has bought you with his life. (To borrow one of admittedly many images for this.)
- Trusting His promise, words like forgiveness and freedom and service start to resonate joyfully.
- In terms of preaching: There's no substitute for Gospel on soil tilled by the Law.
- The preacher must delight like a butterfly and sting like the Hammer of Thor-i.e., bash Old Adam's unregenerate house to unrecognizable pieces. The bruised reed she must not break; the filthy tombs she must not whitewash. Discernment? Of course. Lazarus! Come forth!
- The preacher must beware to NEVER promote religion for the sake of filling the pews or coffers. Church is not a social club because you're too righteous to go to the bar and meet someone. The Divine Service is not to fulfill psychological needs. Go see a shrink. Get a life.
- Preachers: proclaim Jesus Christ or hang up the stole.