

“What Time Is It?” (A Sermon Suited for New Year’s Day)

Colleagues,

The Rev. Lars Olson is today’s contributor. I haven’t met him, and can tell you nothing about him beyond those things you can read for yourself at the website of [First Lutheran Church, Sioux Falls, South Dakota](#), where he serves as an associate pastor. First Lutheran is a large ELCA congregation with enough oomph to broadcast its Sunday services. Steven Kuhl of Crossings caught one of them a year ago while visiting his parents in nearby Worthington, Minnesota. Pr. Olson was preaching. Steve’s ears, ever attuned to the distinguishing of law and gospel or a lack thereof, perked up. Once home, he wrote to Pr. Olson and secured the transcript you’ll read below.

I bill this in the title above as New Year’s Day preaching. That’s a bit of editorial license. In fact, the day when it happened was the last Sunday in 2014, or in the Church’s reckoning, the first after Christmas. The day’s texts included [Galatians 4:4-7](#) and [Luke 2:22-40](#). You’ll see Pr. Olson making good use of both as he encourages his listeners—that now includes us—to put Christ to the work he was born for.

Thanks indeed to Pr. Olson for his permission, via Steve, to send this to you.

Speaking of time, another reminder that the next Crossings Conference is in the offing. It breaks loose just over three weeks from now, in Belleville, Illinois, across the river from St. Louis. No, it’s not too late to get your registration in. I hope you will if you haven’t yet. The fare will be rich, the feasting grand, and all the more if you’re there to share it.

Peace and Joy,

Jerry Burce

“What Time Is It?”

Grace and peace to you, from God our Father, and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, who was born under the law in order to redeem us from the law, so that we would no longer be slaves, but heirs of the kingdom. Amen

The birth of Christ was not a secret. It had been foretold, expected, and anticipated and yet it was a complete surprise. Even though Mary and Joseph had been greeted by angels with God’s word about Jesus’ coming, they were in no way prepared for what this child was to accomplish. How could they be? Truly new things are impossible to prepare for, otherwise they would be just updates; newer versions of the same old things. No, when truly new things arrive, we can only just adjust to them upon arrival. And this Jesus, the God in the flesh baby, was truly something new.

So how did they react to this new thing? Well, in exactly the old ways. Did you notice how tied to the regular patterns Mary and Joseph are in the Gospel lesson? Circumcised on the 8th day, according to the law. They reported dutifully for the rites of purification, for both Mary and Jesus, and there they offered a pair of birds just as the law required. You can read all the details for yourself in Leviticus 12 if you like. Luke also points out that Jesus was presented to the Lord, as the first born, to be holy and set aside as God’s own, as God commanded following the Passover in Exodus 13. Yes, you see this new thing that God was doing (Isaiah 43) was incomprehensible to the old ways, and so they treated him as an old thing.

Can you see it? They go through all the laws demands because that is what they know of God! The law gives a pattern, a structure, a set of do's and don'ts. All of which was given by God for the purpose of bringing forth the savior of the world. But as usual, God's law becomes a god to the point that the law is the way of salvation. The do's and don'ts become the ultimate power in the universe. The morality of justice and equality become worshipped and adored as an almighty power that cannot be resisted, whose opponents will all be overthrown. The God we have come to know in Jesus Christ is then seen as a vassal, an underling and a servant of the unchangeable, all powerful *Law*.

It's almost a wrestling match. Like Jacob at the Jabbok River (Genesis 32), or Hulk Hogan vs. Andre the Giant. Or Parents vs. Kids who are trying to open Christmas presents during Advent. You just don't know who will prevail until the moment of truth.

It is in the midst of this confusion, about who is God and ruler—is Jesus our savior, or is the law?—that the old man Simeon and the old prophet Anna appear. There in the temple, in the midst of fulfilling the law's demands, the good news of Christ is revealed. Simeon and Anna both began extolling the wonder of the *Child*, not the keeping of the law. In the temple, surrounded by the people of God, they praise God and talk only of the baby Jesus, saying nothing of the purification rights or the ritual dedication required according to the law. Even the offering of the doves is overlooked, in favor of the little boy in their midst. Both of these devout and elderly persons praise God, pointing only to the long awaited Savior. Here is what was promised. Finally, their years of waiting had ended.

For Simeon, this means that his death is near. God promised that he would see the Messiah before his death. Now that he has seen Jesus, he sings of his happy departure! "Lord let your servant go in peace; your word has been fulfilled. My own eyes have seen

your salvation, which you have prepared for all people—a light of revelation to gentiles, and the glory of your people Israel (Luke 2:29-32).” Oh, he is comforted, even comforted to the end of his life, that God is true to his word, sending a Savior not just another set of principles, rules, or laws.

And what is finally wrong with the law? Well, first off it is never perfect. Those with the power to interpret or judge get to make the rulings in every gray area (and there are always *many* gray areas). So even in the last few months we have seen the call to change laws, for more justice, a better system, to fine-tune the laws and make the system fairer. Good and fine, it is good for society to have better accountability, and more justice. But remember well the second problem with the law: it always accuses (Apology IV)! Just when you think you’ve got it all together, there will be another outcry from someone else who has been oppressed. The more we use the law as our great keeper and judge, the more we will be found unworthy.

Which is exactly why we need a Messiah not a Moses. We need redemption from the law itself, for the law brings wrath (Rom 4:15). St. Paul saw this so clearly when he wrote his letter to the Galatians, “When the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law.” At the right time, Jesus came to tussle with the law. Not to defeat it, but to fulfill it.

Here is Martin Luther: “Christ himself says, ‘I judge no one’ (John 8:15) and ‘I did not come to judge the world, but to save it’ (John 12:47).” Or as Luther paraphrases, “That is: ‘I did not come to promulgate the law and to judge men according to it, as Moses and other lawgivers did. I am performing a more sublime and better function. I judge and condemn the Law. The Law kills you, and I kill it in turn; and as through death I abolish death’” (*1535 Commentary on Galatians, Luther’s Works*, Vol. 26

(ed. J. Pelikan and W. Hansen, 1963), 368).

That's a match fit for pay-per-view.

This is why Simeon sings God's praise, because a Messiah has been given, a Savior has come to do something completely new. Jesus will do what people cannot. He will establish the law, that is, he will give it its limit and its place. Whether you've been naughty or nice will not determine your standing, and even Santa's judgment will not rule you, for the law will not be your god. Rather, in your hearts and minds, deep down in your very conscience, Jesus will rule with a word of comfort and peace; he will reign by granting you his forgiveness and righteousness; justification apart from the law.

Of course, Simeon realizes that it will be a true struggle, for in Christ Jesus "many will be falling and rising in Israel, and he will be a sign that will be opposed." He will have to wrestle the kingdom into existence, against sword and sin, against, destruction and death. But what Simeon doesn't even realize, is that Jesus will lose. When the time comes, he loses the wrestling match, giving himself to redeem you. He is pinned and defeated, and in his falling he promises to raise you up. And in so doing, you are saved from being a slave to the law under which you were born, and incredibly, in Christ Jesus, you, sinner that you are, have been adopted as a child of God.

So, my friends, the question for us now is, "What time is it?" I don't ask if you have a watch or if this sermon has gone on too long. I don't mean it in the accusing tone of a parent waiting for a teenager sneaking in past curfew (or that same teenage wondering how long she has been grounded). I'm not looking for a scientific answer about time being relative, or the more philosophical notion "that time waits for no one." I'm not even asking you to take stock of the last year as the calendar is

about to flip.

But I'm asking it in the sense of what Simeon speaks. Are you still waiting and wondering? Or has your Savior arrived to bring you joy and wonder? Has Christ arrived as your salvation? Do you trust the promise that this child born of a woman, born under the law, has redeemed you from and saved you from sin and death?

The time has been fulfilled. The Savior has been given. And in Christ Jesus, God has kept his promise and sent a Savior to you—to do a completely new thing!

The Rev. Lars Olson

Sioux Falls, South Dakota

Angles on Angels, and on Genuine Christmas Peace

Colleagues,

First:

If you haven't signed on yet for next month's Crossings conference, consider doing so this week. Call it a Christmas gift to yourself, if that helps. The topic is pressing, as are the speakers I'll get to introduce as keynoter for the event. Because of their readiness to pitch in, we're able to offer that rarity of treats for you to learn from and enjoy, i.e. an inter-tribal Lutheran event that invites folks to step across the lines we commonly cluster behind and concentrate together on our shared theological vocation. The task, simply put, is to make

the most of Christ and his benefits. The matter we'll explore is the daily challenge of living simultaneously in two worlds, the one established in creation, the other launched once and for all on Easter morning. In the one we live and die by Law. In the other we by die and live by faith in the Son of God, in whom we too are "new creation" (2 Cor. 5:17). Nice, lovely words, yes, but how do they play out in the mundane doings of a Christian congregation, or in the enterprise of Christian education, say, or on the aggressively secular turf that most baptized people spend most of their time on? These are issues we all wrestle with, all the while seeking the guidance and presence of the Holy Spirit—yet how and where do we discern that Spirit?

So that's what we'll be talking about. Is it enough to whet the appetite? I hope so. I hope all the more that you'll be moved and able to join the conversation. January 24-27 at the Shrine of Our Lady of the Snows, Belleville, Illinois. For details, and to register if you haven't yet, see the [Crossings website](#).

Next, and to our topic today:

'Tis the season when too many pastors are still casting for angles on this year's bout of Christmas preaching. It erupts next week. Among the untold numbers whose Christmas habits include a trip to church will be at least a few who are wondering even now if they'll hear anything fresh emerging from the old familiar story this time around.

There's no reason they shouldn't, of course. Almighty God is Lord and Master of the Gift that keeps on giving, as all serious students of the Word discover sooner or later. Even the most tired of familiar texts—[Luke 2:1-20](#), say—will toss out new bits of wondrous joy when you take the time to rummage around in them, and all the more when you do so with an eye on the original Greek text and a few essential tools to help you track

what you're seeing there.

So, for example, those shepherds weren't merely terrified when the Lord's glory blazed around them. No, "they feared a mega-fear," a rare and special agony that's promptly doused and replaced by the "mega-joy" of the angel's "good-newsing."

Or take that detail about the singing angels, which to most of us will have always seemed as little more than a cute, throwaway gloss on the real action in the story. To the contrary. With the least bit of digging and scraping it emerges as an essential piece of the night's good news, the very reason why that baby's birth turns mega-fear into mega-joy. Consider: suddenly, in the skies above, a teeming throng of the heavenly "host." To folks ensnared by modern English, that sounds redundant, "host" being heard as nothing more than a fancy alternative for "lots of 'em." It isn't. Or, rather it wasn't, not when King James's scholars penned their definitive translation, nor even two hundred years later, when Lord Byron wrote a poem, "The Destruction of Sennecharib," that became a favorite in Victorian England. Here are the first two stanzas—

*The Assyrian came down like the wolf on the fold,
And his cohorts were gleaming in purple and gold;
And the sheen of their spears was like stars on the sea,
When the blue wave rolls nightly on deep Galilee.
Like the leaves of the forest when Summer is green,
That host with their banners at sunset were seen:
Like the leaves of the forest when Autumn hath blown,
That host on the morrow lay withered and strown.*

"Host," in other words, is "army." And so it is, wouldn't you know, in Luke's Greek text. His word is "stratios," which is nothing less or other than a military force. By it he points to the biggest threat by far that looms over the world and calls

for “mega-fearing,” and no, it isn’t anything so trifling as ISIS, or guns rampant, or whatever else the fear-mongers are peddling this month in America. As the baby born this night will later put it, “Don’t fear those who kill the body but can’t kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell” (Matt. 10:28).

So here’s the real story: over Bethlehem on Christmas night hovers unseen and unsuspected that greatest threat of all, the ultimate instrument of God’s wrath as seen through the lens of first-century imagination. Really, choristers? Are you kidding? These are heavenly beings—let’s leave it that; it doesn’t say angels—arrayed for battle, “the sheen of their spears...like stars on the sea,” massed in a multitude of companies, cohorts and divisions that Sennacharib could only dream of. And now—suddenly—the great astonishment, breaking loose in the sky at the very moment the baby’s birth gets mentioned. It’s the riotous tumult of a happy army, relieved and glad beyond imagining that the battle is off, the war canceled. Ergo their song: “Glory to God in the highest—this God of grace and mercy, this specialist in all things impossible, who has found another way to solve the mess of sin that won’t involve us in the slaughter of sinners. As for you down there on earth, Peace, y’all. God *likes* you. Fancy that!” And, with that, the soldiers troop back to their barracks.

Mega-joy indeed where mega-fear once was, or ought to have been.

So how does a gem like this get conveyed to the micro-fearing folk who will gather in churches on Christmas Eve, 2015? For that I punt at this point to Ed Schroeder, who last week sent me some thoughts he shared with another friend in response to a Christmas letter. The topic here is “peace,” and whether and how we can speak credibly of that in a world that continues to choke its roads with tides of refugees, and shelter its poor in

hovels, and embrace darkness as its fate.

God has better things by far in mind for sinners, not that we deserve them. Let's use these days to get the word out. *Christus natus est*. "To us is born a Savior... " Alleluia!

Peace and Joy,

Jerry Burce

"Peace on Earth. The One Realized—Made Really Real—at the First Christmas"

Dear _____,

You write that "The ongoing violence and suffering which we see in our country and in so many parts of the world show that the 'peace on earth' which Christ came to bring is far from realized."

Is that true? That peace on earth today is far from realized? Might it be at least partly realized, or even fully realized? That depends on which war you're thinking of. Which, in turn, raises the question of which war—yes, here, "on earth"—Christ came to end, replacing it with peace, and not at all a peace still "far from realized," but a peace 100% real, 100% realized.

Just as Pilate couldn't comprehend Jesus' kingship (John 18:33ff.) so we Christ-followers keep struggling with Christ's peace. If, as we think, he didn't bring it, or brought it only partially, then was he not a total flop? He said he was bringing peace. But if so, then peace in which war? To conflicts with and within the Roman empire? To Jewish internecine struggles?

Hardly. These warrings were patently not fazed, not in the least ameliorated, by the time Jesus said "It is finished." But then why did Jesus say that? Might something indeed have been "finished," a done deal? If so, what?

The peace "Christ came to bring" was not peace on the battlefield of human vs. human conflict. His is not the sort of peace on earth that we regularly envision with our own Pilate-ish minds, namely the kind where people stop fighting with each other. Vicious though such fighting is, it is a only surface symptom of a more primal conflict, a cosmic war, between the Creator on the hand and the Creator's human creatures on the other. Christ's peace was and is a peace in that war, the one where all the earth's human inhabitants are on one side, allied and arrayed against their Creator, their petty warrings with each other notwithstanding.

Trouble is, lots of folks make light of this Global War. Some don't even know, let alone acknowledge, that they are involved in it as active combatants in the armed forces of the human race. Still less do they realize that "The Force" they're at war with is the very force that brought them into existence in the first place. So neither do they grasp the pickle we're in. With that Force against us, you know who is going to win if armistice never comes.

Back to John's Gospel we need to go, where Jesus makes it perfectly clear what war he'd ending. "*Not as the world envisions peace,*" he says, "*is the peace I give.*" Note the tense of the verb. He "gives. And if Christ is giving it, then it is real—and "realized." Or if not he's lying. Though according to John's Gospel, how can he be? There the "father of lies" is patently identified as someone else—someone who is at war with Jesus, the truth-personified. So Jesus' peace is peace finally arriving in the human vs. God conflict, not the human vs. human

conflict. (Martin Luther's Latin lingo for that is "coram Deo" as distinct from "coram hominibus.") And that's the conflict that needs attention first. If you never come to peace with God, you lose in the Big War, even when, in the little ones with human enemies, you might somehow come to peace.

Consider Jesus' very own words: "In the world you will have tribulation." Tribulation is non-peace. Tribulation is standard operating procedure in "the world," as John uses that vocable. To undo that "tribulation" is *not* Jesus' agenda. You can't find a single place in all four gospels where he said anything like that. He has a much bigger fish to fry. He's out to resolve the cosmic Ur-conflict. John's Gospel tips us off to that already in chapter one: "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." Reconciling God and sinners: that's the warfare Jesus addresses—enmity toward God on the human side, rightful wrath of God on the other. Again, call it The Big War, the genuinely "world" war, worldlings at war with the world's creator, and thus at war with the worldlings' own creator too. Pots in rebellion against their own potter (Jer. 18). To stick with that simile, you know who holds the hammer if peace never comes.

Or turn again in St. John to the great account of Christ's initial post-Easter appearances (John 20:19ff.). On two successive Sunday evenings Jesus says to the disciples, "Peace be with you." The phrase gets repeated three times in just those few verses. So peace on what battlefield? Surely not with the Romans or Jews on the other side of their locked doors. As the disciples clearly recognize, those guys are still out to get them. So what peace does Jesus bring? The peace that came through the body now marked with scars. And on what battlefield did those wounds make peace? Not the one where the fight is with the guys outside the locked doors.

Rather, it's peace in the primordial conflict that started with the first exodus, not from Egypt, but from Eden. That was the peace-agenda for Jesus. That's where his promised peace was indeed "realized." For those who trust him, that war is over. For those who do not, it continues. And warfare with God on the battlefield of the human heart comes to expression in warfare-with-weapons among us humans. That word for that again is "tribulation," which, he said, will continue among human kind. "You *will* have tribulation." It's the trademark of the fallen world—which Christ-trusters don't escape, even though they're now at peace in the Big War. That tribulation trademark will persist in the world for as long as wordlings who *don't* trust forgiveness persist. Even so, the great advantage Christ-trusters have amid persisting "tribulation" is that they no longer need to "fear" it. The "Fear not" message delivered way back when to the Bethlehem shepherds is a "Fear no longer" about the Big War, and a "fear no more" about the persisting "little" ones. That includes even the ones that directly threaten your lives.

"Though you die, yet shall you live." The Peacemaker in the Primal War said so.

Back to John 20. So the way to cope with that never-ceasing tribulation is what Jesus is telling the disciples about themselves. "Trusting the message" of my wounded hands and side, you *are* at peace with God. Now comes your calling—which is *not* first off to go out there and get people to stop fighting with each other. But "As the Father sent me, so I send you." Go for the jugular, for the root of the problem. It's the "God-problem," the stuff that shows up in Crossings text-analysis as Step 3, the deep-down level of diagnosis. Be peace-makers for folks still engaged in the Big War. Move people from being unforgiven sinners to being forgiven sinners. That's what the Big Peace is. And (says Jesus) I herewith authorize you for the

task. "If you forgive the sins of any they *are* forgiven them." Their warfare with God is over. If you leave them 'stuck' in their sins, their God-warfare goes on, "their sins are retained." And prima facie evidence that their God-war persists is that their warfare with each other never ends.

So multiply sin-forgiveness. That's the agenda now handed on to you. "As the Father sent me, so I send you."

Back to that business about "peace on earth" in St. Luke's nativity narrative.

"Hark!" What are those "herald angels" [*editor*: that relieved and happy army] singing?

"Peace on earth and mercy mild.

God and sinners reconciled."

So "Fear not," says the angel, who delivers the grounds for this in the words that follow next. And the "Fear not" is not because Herod's gonna now be a nice guy, and Pilate will be pleasant.

Instead, the Good Tidings of Great Joy are that a "Savior" is born in David's city to save not only shepherds but all the losers—losers in the God-war, that is. Notice now the marks, the signs, that distinguish him. "You will find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger," the latter being an enclosure of sorts. That sounds like the end of Luke's Gospel as well as the beginning. Jesus is wrapped and mangered at the beginning of the story; at the end he is wrapped and entombed. Because of this wrapping, especially the grand finale at the end, there is "God-peace *on earth*." It's available for everyone and de facto in place with those folks who trust God's "good will toward humankind," aka God's "mercy mild," enfleshed, enmangered, entombed, then ex-tombed. Alleluiah! God's peace on

earth realized. It all began at Bethlehem.

Though it sounds ludicrous to worldly wisdom—the NT Greek word here is “skandalon”—the way to peace in human warfare is via human repentance in the God-war. That triggers peace with God.

The evangelist Mark sought to make that perfectly clear in his opening words: “This is the beginning of the Good News of Jesus Christ.” He then quotes Jesus’ first words, “Repent and believe the Good News.” It starts with repentance, i e., surrender in the God-war. The peace-offer is part two, the Good News that Jesus *is*. So trust it.

That, says Mark, is the “beginning” of the Good News of Jesus Christ. Mark’s Gospel notoriously ends with no ending. The oldest Greek manuscripts stop in the middle of the report of the empty tomb. Later manuscripts offer a few fill-in sentences to signal where it was all to end. “He said to them, ‘Go into all the world and proclaim the Good News to the whole creation.’ . . . and they went out and proclaimed the Good News everywhere.”

That may sound like nonsense—to us too—as a “Work for Peace” proposal to get peace on earth “realized.” Yet that is the scandalous proposal that had its beginning at Bethlehem.

Cheers!

Ed Schroeder

December, 2015

A Call for Reformation as a Church Year Dawns

Colleagues,

Advent launched again last Sunday to do for the Christian world as the days surrounding January 1st do for the secular one. Four days in, it's tugging eyes toward the future in a move that also drives a reappraisal of the present. The word we use in church for "reappraisal" is "repentance." We'll hear about that these next two Sundays as John the Baptist takes his annual turn on the center stage of lecterns and pulpits. May those who deliver John's word be astute enough to remind us all that repentance is reappraisal on steroids. At issue is no mere adjustment of habit and procedure, but an overhaul of worldview and mindset. Or as Bruce K. Modahl describes it in today's offering, it's a matter of getting bent *into* shape, where the mold is Christ and the power that drives the bending is none other than the Holy Spirit.

Unholy spirits are raging as ever in the world this week, no less in the U.S. than anywhere else. Such is their noise and fury that some may wonder if Bruce's essay isn't somehow beside the point of the matters we ought to be exploring at the moment—guns, and wrath, and folly, and lies, and the impotent vitriol of our political discourse, to name a few. I think you'll quickly see that the contrary is the case. Unless Christians are repenting together around their Christ, they have nothing to contribute to the day's madness except more noise, more fury. Bruce will show why. Amid his observations you'll see outlines of the only Advent agenda that makes any sense at all for a church that aims to deliver a whiff of genuine promise to a hope-starved world.

Bruce sends this, by the way, from Fernandina Beach, Florida, where he lives in retirement from three and a half decades of pastoral ministry, the final two spent as Senior Pastor of Grace Lutheran Church, River Forest, Illinois. Grace is an independent congregation served by ELCA pastors in buildings abutting the campus of Concordia University (LCMS). Arrangements like that are conducive to the clarity of thought you're about to encounter. You'll find more of it in Bruce's recent contributions (since 2014) as a Crossings text study writer.

Peace and Joy,

Jerry Burce

Getting Bent into Shape: A Call for Reformation

by Bruce K. Modahl

It has been some years ago now (George W. Bush was president) that a friend came into town to go with me to a five-day preaching conference. This event is held every year. The host churches are large, old, gothic places located in the heart of major cities. Close to 1000 pastors come from all over the country. The participants are Methodist, Presbyterian, United Church of Christ, some Lutherans and Episcopalians and a smattering of Roman Catholics. It is a preaching conference for the mainline or old-line churches. The less kind call it the sideline.

On the political spectrum my friend is just to the right of Rush Limbaugh. He considers Bill O'Reily a moderate. He started squirming right away on Monday because of the constant potshots taken at the current administration in Washington. The potshots

coming from the dais were one thing. But with every potshot the people all around us sniggered, applauded and laughed. To a speaker that sort of response from an audience is gas on the fire so they gave us more of it. I don't share my friend's political views. I thought many of the potshots were funny. But it got to the point that I had to check the program to see if this was indeed a preaching conference or had we wandered into an event sponsored by MoveOn.org.

One speaker compared the neocons and fear mongers in Washington to the Siths, the scary species in what was then the latest Star Wars episode. One lecture was entitled "Preaching across Differences." But even that presenter spent a good bit of her time ridiculing right-wing religious leaders. "Tune in to 'Feeling the Hate' with the National Religious Broadcasters," she quipped. And when she actually got to the point of addressing those who have different opinions on politics and social issues her advice amounted to pointers on how to enlighten those in the dark and open closed minds. Two days into this and during one particularly partisan lecture my friend leaned into me and said, "I don't know that I belong here."

At big-box churches in the suburbs, the antithesis of mainline Gothic, pastors gather for similar events. Only these are from the other end of the religious-political spectrum. A speaker at one such gathering said, "If we have to give equal time to every opposing viewpoint there would be no time to proclaim the truth." And then he mocked liberal Christians by adopting a lisping, limp-wristed voice. Using that voice he said, "Those who want to share and be sensitive to the needs of others are wrong." The place erupted in applause and laughter. If my friend and I attended that conference I would be the one leaning into him and saying, "I don't think I belong here."

Something is wrong here. What constitutes our belonging is being

in Christ by faith. We are baptized into Christ. That is not what seems to matter. Something is wrong here. What forms the church is the gospel, the good news that we are justified, that is declared righteous, by God's grace, by God's free gift, through faith in Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit forms the church by that gospel. Luther said the Holy Spirit uses the Gospel to "call, gather, enlighten, sanctify and keep us." The image that comes to mind is a lump of clay with the cross pressed into it. That is the shape we are in. But the churches gathered in these disparate places seem to be formed by something else. Something is bending the church out of shape. Triumphalism does it. Triumphalism is, "We are saved and they are not. We are right and they are stupid." Triumphalism is incompatible with the cross. It distorts the cross. It bends the church out of shape today just as certainly as it bent the church out of shape in Luther's day.

What bends the church out of shape is adding something to the gospel. "Yes, we believe Jesus Christ was crucified and raised for our salvation. But if you expect to be saved, if you really want to be a Christian, then you must do enough good works or buy enough indulgences to cancel out your sin." That is what bent the church out of shape in Luther's day.

In the first century some representatives from the bishop's office in Jerusalem came to visit the churches in Galatia and found they were ignoring some of the Old Testament laws. They said, "We believe Jesus was crucified and raised for our salvation but if you expect to be saved, and if you really want to live as God's people then you must also be circumcised and observe the dietary laws." That is what bent the church out of shape in Paul's day.

Nowadays, we hear, in effect, "We believe in Jesus Christ crucified and raised for our salvation but if we are to be right

with God and with one another, and if we want to live as Christians then we must also hold to this particular set of opinions on the current political and social issues. If you want to belong here that is what you must do." This is what is bending the church out of shape in our day so that some will say, "I don't belong here."

It happens by adding something to the gospel. That addition is the hallmark of triumphalism. When we add something to the gospel we are in effect saying, "Jesus' death and resurrection are not enough." The issue here goes far beyond being civil with those with whom we disagree. The problem goes much deeper than our civic life. When we add something to the Gospel we belittle Christ's work on the cross. We rob the cross of Christ of its power. We offend God.

The church is bent out of shape and needs reform. It needs to be bent back into shape. The Holy Spirit uses the gospel to reform us. There is pain involved. Getting bent into shape hurts. The truth hurts, we say. First and foremost Jesus is the Truth. We see hurt looming before us at the cross. It hurts to admit that our sin requires nothing less than the death of God's Son. Our brokenness requires a crucified and risen savior. The Truth convicts us of the fact. The Truth humbles us. It frees us from any notion of our own righteousness. And it frees us from any notion that we are worthless. God in Jesus became one of us. We are so filled with worth in God's sight that he gave his Son for us. We recognize our own worth in the face of Jesus. The Truth opens up to us the new world of the kingdom of God in which we live with one another not by being right but by God's grace. By God's grace we are managers of God's mercy in our daily lives and so extend God's kingly rule day by day into new territory. As Christ humbled himself, we practice humility with each other. As Christ sought and loved and called and welcomed all to new life, so do we. This does not mean we avoid discussing difficult

issues. On the contrary I think because we are secure in Christ we are free to do so. My friend and I discuss and argue and sometimes we have to apologize to each other for the way we have expressed ourselves. But we stand next to each other in worship, embrace when it is time to share the peace and come one behind the other with our hands extended as the beggars we are for the bread of life in Holy Communion.

Wesley J. Wildman wrote, “When the going gets tough and worldview conflicts cause fights, that’s the time to retell the old, old story” [“When Narratives Clash,” *Congregation* (Fall, 2005:28-35), 35]. We tell how Jesus overcame the biggest barrier of all, the one between God and us. We tell how Paul engaged in the hard work of gathering so many different kinds of people into Christian communities. These were people who otherwise would not have anything to do with one another. But in Christ, Paul said, there is no longer slave and free, male and female, Jew and Gentile. And while we might have red state and blue state, red church/blue church is not the church. Red church/blue church is the church bent out of shape.

It is time once again for reformation.

Listen to the Veterans, Part 2. Counsel for a “Non-Religious” Veterans’ Advocate

Colleagues,

In our last post we sent you a review by Ed Schroeder of a book

entitled Moral Injury and Just War. As Ed was wrapping his work on that, he was surprised to get the following notice—

“You are invited to view “Is Anybody Listening?” at 5:00pm on Sunday, October 11th at the national office of Veterans For Peace [1404 N. Broadway, St. Louis, MO 63102]. “Is Anybody Listening” is a powerful and moving film that connects the non-veteran world with the experience of veterans, giving the veteran the chance to speak openly about their experience in war. ”

So Ed went and watched, and with him, Marie, his wife; and in the next morning’s wee hours he sent a note to one Paula Caplan, the film’s writer and producer, who was at the screening. You’ll see that below, in a somewhat edited version. Of interest, aside from the issue itself, is how one approaches a conversation with a person of intensely good will who asserts a distance from “religious” perspectives. The need to figure that out becomes ever more pressing in today’s America.

Meanwhile Christ reigns, as we recall with exaltation this Sunday. With that in mind—

Peace and Joy,

Jerry Burce

Dear Paula,

Some musings after last evening’s get-together to view your film.

1. I think I heard you tell us in the post-film conversation “I’m not religious.” Really? Your film begins with a divine imperative from the Bible, “Thou shalt not kill,” which becomes an invisible thread throughout the film. Somewhere along the line the word “sacred” popped up; and then came another “religious” item that I cannot remember now. Later in the post-viewing discussion you used “sacred” at least four times about your own experience in veteran listening. Yet “sacred” is the word for God-turf. So what’s with “I’m not religious”?

2. Might that be a deceptive catch-all phrase, like PTSD, and equally vulnerable to the kind of critique—rightful critique in my judgment—that you peppered us with about PTSD?

3. To listen to veterans as you urged is to offer them healing, You said so umpteen times. But there's a kind of listening and healing—essential, at least for some—that the PTSD-professionals of the Veterans' Administration don't offer, and can't offer. That's because it happens on sacred God-turf, where V.A. professionals won't go, and can't go. It's against the law!

4. From what we learned last night, your Johnny and Jane listening program doesn't offer this kind of healing either, or at least not yet; though it seems to me that it possibly could.

5.. This brings up the issue of diagnosis, as in diagnosis of the malady, and what sorts of healing are needed. I will be brash enough to say that what we saw and heard from you last evening (first the film, then the speech) under-diagnoses the malady, or at least the malady for some vets, especially those driven to suicide. They have done terrible things, witnessed terrible things, done nothing in the face of terrible things—ungodly, anti-godly things. They've violated not only their own personal sacred-turf, but God's sacred turf too. That's even more drastic, with even more dreadful consequences.

6. The biblical term for a God-turf violator is "sinner." That signals a dilemma deeper than the moral anguish and injury that comes of violating one's own moral code. What's been violated is the primordial "Thou shalt not kill" command, which comes from God; which means in turn that their malady is playing out not only on the turf of their personal moral code, but on sacred God-turf. And whether they believe in God or not, the message has somehow gotten through to them that they've got a problem with the God whose "order" they have violated by killing. This includes those who may say they are "not religious."

7. The "order" on the God-turf is that human life is sacred. In Biblical lingo: humans are created in the image of God. To

destroy a “God-image” brings drastic dis-order into the God-turf, the God-turf where the destroyer exists, willy nilly. Though there is then an “order” for restoring order, when such killing occurs on the God-turf, the turf of the sacred. “They that take the sword shall perish with the sword.” And that primordial restoration of “order”—apparently written into human plasma—is now being carried out with their own hand as they use their own sword to bring death-for-death back into equilibrium. In macabre fashion the suicide restores “order.” It is not PTSD “disorder” that is often here at work in some tormented veterans, but divine “order” in the human plasma. “I killed a God-image; my own God-image is forfeit. I’ll restore order.”

8. There are two ways to restore “order” in Biblical theology (Judeo and Christian). One I’ve just described: death for death. Yes, self-administered death for a killer. That’s the “order of God’s law” on the turf of the sacred. There is another. It’s called forgiveness, the “order of God’s mercy” available on the same sacred turf. To restore “order” and have the killer-veteran still alive—even more, “healed”—calls for the “order of forgiveness.” That’s why the Jewish (!) Jesus is celebrated among Christians. That was his shtik. But even the mercy/forgiveness offered by Jesus—no surprise—has its taproot in the God of the Hebrews, for whom the Hebrew word “chesedh”—mercy, forgiveness—was what distinguished this deity from all the other deities in the ancient Mesopotamian world. “I desire mercy—me being merciful to you—rather than sacrifice—you doing stuff for me” was his fundamental mantra. Hosea 6:6 et passim. That was HIS shtik! When Jesus wanted to let folks know what he was up to, that was the text he quoted.

9. I’m not trying to dissuade you from your own “I’m not religious” mantra. [Well, maybe I am.] Mostly I’m urging you to be an even better clinician than the super-one I’ve learned that you already are. Push your diagnostic probe to the deepest taproot of the suicidal veteran, the God-turf.

10. And when that turf is presented by the client, someone apart from the client will have to pronounce the forgiveness. The up-till-now “silent” listener—or someone—will have to offer it. Humans cannot self-forgive their God-violation. It must come from the party who was violated. That’s even the way it happens, the only way, when one human has done wrong to another. The “violated other” must speak the forgiveness. In both Hebrew and Christian theology, other humans have been authorized to be God’s spokespersons for healing under “the order of forgiveness.”

11. A key story for us Christians with our “Jewish” Jesus is this one: Some friends bring their paralyzed brother to Jesus, prostrate on his own bed. We’re not told what his paralysis is. Maybe nobody knows. He could have been a soldier, or a murderer. In any case, he’s paralyzed. First words from Jesus: “Young man, you’ll be glad to hear this: your sins are forgiven.” Result? He rises from the bed, and walks away as an upright pedestrian. The bystanders marvel. “Is that what his paralysis was? But only God can forgive sinners. Has God given this authority to human beings?” The answer is Yes. It was patent before, it is now, beginning with Jesus.

12. I ran across a 21st century parallel to that story in the American Bible Society magazine that just showed up at our place. It’s about healing the “moral injury” (aka sin) of a U.S. Navy admiral. A chaplain reports being called into the office of the admiral, a man who orchestrated Navy operations across half the world. Having found him to be a tough and test commander in all previous encounters, the chaplain was wary. But today the admiral looked weary. He took a deep breath and began to unload the burden from his 34 years of service in the military. “Ordering others to kill had taken a toll in him,” explains the chaplain, “it weighed on him very heavily.” The chaplain did what chaplains are called to do, which is to hear confessions and offer absolution, God’s own forgiveness. “Tell God whatever

you want to tell him,” he said. At the end of the three-way conversation, we hear these words from the commander: “I feel like I lost 10 pounds. I’m forgiven. It’s incredible.”

13. So why not put this addendum to your program? Here’s a case study to support it. Despite your protestation, you are crypto-religious anyway. So put something like this this into your next re-write of chapter six:

“Some veterans may wind up confessing their sins to you. This is more than moral anguish needing an attentive ear. It’s a person wanting to hear a word of forgiveness that comes finally from God. To do that, yes, is “against the law,” and in more ways than one. But do it anyway. We have it on divine authority that the order of mercy trumps the order of law. If you can’t do it yet, learn how. For that you may first have to believe and receive it yourself. But when you are able, then do it. ‘Friend, you’ll be glad to hear this. Your sins are forgiven. The God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob—and Jesus too—says so.’”

It worked for the admiral. It will also works for folks of lower ranks.

Ed (and Marie too) Schroeder

“Will No One Have the Guts to be a Sinner?” –Preface and Ur-text

Colleagues,

1. The congregation I serve is going to celebrate the Reformation this coming Sunday. So will lots of other

Lutheran churches in the U.S., and elsewhere too. Whether and how joyfully they do it will depend heavily on their pastors' opinions about the merits of what happened in 1517 and thereafter, and, more to the point, about the value of a distinct and vivid Lutheran identity for the mission of Christ in the world of 2015. There's dispute about this in most every U.S. Lutheran camp today, whatever its cultural leaning, to the right as well as the left. For her part, the ELCA's Presiding Bishop Elizabeth Eaton knows value when she sees it. Ever since her election two years ago she's been working hard to shove some steel up the Lutheran spines of her large, unruly flock. [Her latest effort along these lines](#) appeared a week or two ago in the October issue of *The Lutheran*. You'll want to read it if you haven't yet. May it whet your appetite for things that follow here.

2. From the solemn to the silly: [Old Lutheran](#) is an enterprise that peddles sub-cultural kitsch, chiefly via the Internet, from its base in Moorhead, Minnesota. They used email this Monday to push their latest product, a zinfandel from the Borra Vineyard of Lodi, California, available in "limited supply," which is simply to say, "Buy today!" The wine's label? You guessed it: [Zin Boldly](#), the words broadly emblazoned over a representation of Luther's seal. The attending ad copy includes the famous dictum, Luther to Melanchthon: "Sin boldly, but believe and rejoice in Christ even more boldly..." So sin with zin, shall we? It would be churlish, I suppose, not to chuckle over this, at least a little; though if we failed to grind our teeth when the chuckle died away—that, I'm sure, would be foolish.
3. Better still if we grind our teeth a lot. I submit on this eve of the Reformation's 498th anniversary that Luther's heirs have lost their grip, if ever they had

one, on his key anthropological insight. Having done so, they're trashing Christ, damaging the Church, and cheating neighbors of the Gospel God wants them to hear. One sees this going on at the close, personal level of interactions within a congregation. One sees it just as vividly in the operations of our church bodies. When we're forced by time or circumstance to flash our deepest convictions, we prove over and over that we're Lutheran in name only. Scrape away the label, and you'll find a simmering Calvinist, a frothing "evangelical," here and there a bit of closet [Tridentine](#)Catholic. OK, I'm exaggerating—though not as much as I wish I were. What does it say about us when the most we're willing to make of Luther at his best and most distinctive is a little joke for insiders on a bottle of wine?

4. This is, of course, a weighty charge, too weighty by far to deal with in a single post. So what I send today is nothing more than a preface for some posts to come, two or three of them at least, maybe more. They'll arrive in serial form under the title the present post bears: "Will no one have the guts to be a sinner?" This, I'll argue, is the question of the hour that Lutherans ought to be pressing for the sake of a church and a world that keeps tearing itself to pieces in the sinner's mad, incessant quest to be deemed righteous on one's own account. We Lutherans are by no means strangers to this madness, nor can we be; though were we serious about the astonishing gifts of faith and insight that the Holy Spirit surfaced through Luther and his colleagues, we'd be able at least to spot the madness, and name it, and struggle against it. I, for one, see little or none of that going on among us. Struggles there are, and in grievous abundance; but they're invariably of the kind the madness itself induces, where the fight boils down to who is right and

who is wrong, woe to the latter, bennies to the former, Christ-for-us-all being more or less beside the point. Christ always lands in the trash when sinners refuse to own their sin. He's gotten far too familiar of late with Lutheran dumpsters—or again, so I plan to argue.

5. I've been stewing on this for some years now, ever since the fellow walked into my office to say that he couldn't come to communion because that would mean communing with a sinful church. I'll tell that story when I launch the first episode. For now I merely point to it as the slap in the face that got the wheels churning. Around that time I stumbled by sheer accident across an incidental bit in the massive corpus of Luther's output—however did the man manage to get all this on paper?—where he says something about sin that took me by surprise. It seemed blithe and cavalier. I could think of no one else who had dared in my hearing or reading to talk that way. The wheels turned faster. Not long after my title emerged. I mean that question about having “the guts to be a sinner.” I wrestled for a time with “the guts.” It's crude. It sounds careless. “The nerve” would be less offensive. But then it occurred to me how guts are featured in Matthew's Gospel. Jesus has them, and in a double sense, not only the English one of “courage,” but also in the New Testament Greek conception, where churning bowels are a signal of pity and compassion. So gutsy Jesus sits with sinners, and feeds them, and is crucified for them; and in and through all this, God “[is making] him to be sin who knew no sin,” as Paul describes it (2 Cor. 5:21). Jesus being sinner-for-us was, first to last, about God-in-Christ having the guts to get the job done. It still is. “Receive the Holy Spirit...”, Jesus said. I got this far in my thinking and returned to my original title. If it scrapes and offends, so be it.

6. Back to Luther. The line about sin that startled me some time ago was not the famous one that Old Lutheran abused for its wine label. I heard about “sin boldly” in my seminary days. The same was true, I’m sure, for all my classmates, though we caught it in passing, and few if any took the time to track down the source and read it in context. Had we done so we might have noticed, already then, how flagrant Luther gets in his recognition of sin as a condition we’re obliged to face, admit, accept, and, with Christ in view, to live with more or less cheerfully. It may be that some or many of you have yet to see the passage, so I pass it along as this year’s Reformation gift, though also as a key piece of grounding for the reflections to come. The date is August 1, 1521, barely two months since Charles V issued the [Edict of Worms](#), making Luther an outlaw. Luther, then, is holed up in the Wartburg Castle. Even so he’s both receiving and responding to a stream of reports and letters from Wittenberg. The latest news is about two disputations that his colleague Karlstadt has undertaken, one about whether priests, monks, and nuns can abandon vows and get married, and the other about making the sacrament available to the laity in both kinds, wine as well as bread. It’s with these in mind that Luther now writes to Philip Melanchthon. After propounding his current views in both matters, he swings abruptly to the following, behind which must surely lie a pastoral concern for a friend who is staring at the challenge of advocating moves that others will denounce loudly as wicked and sinful. “Break a vow? Are you kidding?” Says Luther:

If you are a preacher of grace, then preach a true and not a fictitious grace; if grace is true, you must bear a true and not a fictitious sin. God does not save people who are only fictitious sinners. **Be a sinner** and

sin boldly, but believe and rejoice in Christ even more boldly, for he is victorious over sin, death, and the world. As long as we are here [in this world] **we have to sin. This life is not the dwelling place of righteousness** but, as Peter says, we look for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells. It is enough that by the riches of God's glory we have come to know the Lamb that takes away the sin of the world. **No sin will separate us from the Lamb, even though we commit fornication and murder a thousand times a day.** Do you think that the purchase price that was paid for the redemption of our sins by so great a Lamb is too small? Pray boldly—you too are a mighty sinner. (Letters I, Volume 48 of Luther's Works, American Edition, p. 281- 282; emphases added.)

7. This was radical stuff. It still is. I can't help but think that had Luther said these things at the Diet of Worms under the grilling of John Eck, he'd have been clapped in irons on the spot and burned at the stake the next day. I'm pretty sure that were someone to talk like this in today's Lutheran assemblies without mentioning Luther as source, he or she would be shown the door, and that right smartly.

But more on this in coming weeks or months, though not immediately. We have some fresh work from Ed Schroeder that awaits your perusal. Look for a first installment of that two weeks from now.

Peace and Joy,
Jerry Burce

War Can't Be Just. Listen to the Veterans

Colleagues,

We're six days away from this year's Veteran's Day observance. It bears remembering that the day first appeared on calendars as Armistice Day, recalling that eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month of 1918, when the armies stopped shooting on the Western Front. This past summer I listened to an audio recording of Barbara Tuchman's *The Guns of August*, about the critical and dreadful first month of World War I. The Germans almost won the war in those brief few weeks, but not quite; and a consequence of how they almost won was a moral outrage, especially in Britain, that ensured the conflict's grinding, butchering continuation until, four years later, the parties finally wore each other out, and one said "uncle" first. In the aftermath, the insanity of what Europe had done was obvious to all. When people, looking back, talked of "the great war," they were speaking merely of its scope, not its character.

27 years later, the Second World War was ending, and now the view was different. So evil had Hitler been, that the shapers of American memory began telling of "the good war" that took him down. John Bodnar of Indiana University argues that it took a while for this idea to emerge as a national consensus. In the two-part offering that comes your way today and next week, you'll find reason for being chary about applying that adjective to any war at all, even the one that stopped the Holocaust. "Good" and "necessary" don't always go hand in hand. Nor, as you'll see, do "necessary" and "just."

Ed Schroeder is our author. Some weeks ago he was finishing the

book review you'll find below, when, from the blue, he got an invitation to attend a screening of a new documentary that touched squarely on the book's topic. So he went, he watched, and after that he wrote a letter to the woman who made the film. That's for next week.

Meanwhile Wednesday will be here. Time was when people paused at 11 o'clock on November 11 for a moment of solemn silence in honor of the dead and in quiet thanksgiving for combatants who survived. I can't recall when that happened last. Might we who share these posts revive the practice, at least among ourselves? And in that quiet moment, let's dare, with Christ in view, to ask Almighty God to pardon what can't be pardoned, to have mercy on the human race, and to wrap his damaged sons and daughters in the arms of his love.

Peace and Joy,
Jerry Burce

Book Review:

Killing from the Inside Out: Moral Injury and Just War

by Robert Emmet Meagher

Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2014

Robert Emmet Meagher is Professor of Humanities at Hampshire College. Here, in his own words, is the gist of this book:

"Just war doctrine was never more than a theory and at its worst it was a lie, a deadly lie. It promised at least the possibility of war without sin, war without criminality, war without guilt or shame, war in which men and women would risk their lives but not their souls or their humanity. This theory has been tested for sixteen centuries, and has failed. It is time to declare its death, write its autopsy, reveal its deadly legacy, and point to a future beyond just war."

I came away from this book with a new understanding of the biblical axiom: "They that take the sword shall perish with the

sword." I must have memorized that Bible passage already in early years in parochial school as a proof-text supporting the commandment, "Thou shalt not kill." But I never learned that the second sword in the sentence was often the same sword that came first in the sentence. And in the same hand! That grisly fact is the drumbeat of Meagher's book. In war the killer's sword often turns back on the killer himself, the one who was not killed—"killing him from the inside out"—with suicide the end of the line.

The book's bizarre title came from the mother of a U.S. veteran, a son who came back from war, seemingly unharmed. But that was only on the outside. For what he had done as warrior—"honorable," he was told by his officers and U.S. society—was working its recompense within him, "from the inside out." He was perishing with the same sword he'd wielded in killing the enemy. It came to closure when he took his own life. As have thousands and thousands of U.S. veterans from recent U.S. wars. Example: there are 50 thousand names on the Vietnam Memorial in Washington DC, warriors who fell in battle. Far more than fifty thousand Vietnam vets have committed suicide since then. The killing they did on the other side of the world came home with them and triggered that second killing.

But Vietnam was long ago.

More recently:

Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta labeled it a "top Pentagon priority," namely, "the runaway suicide rate in the military, averaging 33 suicides per month in 2012, roughly one every 17 hours."

Or this: "Even this number—representing confirmed suicides among active-duty troops—falls far short of the dark truth. Off the Department of Defense's map and spreadsheets are the veterans, who, weeks or months or years after their war service, take their lives often without much national or even local notice. Here the numbers are even more shocking—22 a day in February

2013, nearly one every hour.”

Meagher uses the term “moral injury” for what war-killing does to the killers.

“This is what we have come to call ‘moral injury,’ the violation, by oneself or another, of a personally embedded moral code or value resulting in deep injury to the psyche or soul. It is what used to be called sin. [Aha!] The haunting question here is: ‘How can there be moral injury in a just war?’”

Their own sword turns back on them, piercing the self, the soul, the inner person, the “who I am.” Finding the right term here is not easy. “Moral injury” too may be too tame. “I violated my own moral code” is frightful. Yet if “it is what used to be called sin,” then the paradigm changes. It’s no longer the “moral” me wrestling with me “the killer,” it’s me the killer wrestling with the God who authored that maxim about taking the sword and perishing with the sword.

Meagher, a classics scholar, surprised me by showing that Homer and Sophocles knew about war-inflicted “moral injury” too. They portrayed it vividly, grimly, explicitly, in Homer’s Iliad and Sophocles’ two Oedipus dramas. Those chapters were eye-openers for me.

And in these chapters Meagher introduces a sub-theme that meanders—discreetly—through the book, namely, the link between war and sex. The Trojan War was fought over a woman, namely, who could sleep with Helen! Oedipus, in complete ignorance, kills his own father in a skirmish and beds his own mother. The choreography of hand-to-hand killing and love-making has many eerie parallels. Killing the men and raping the women go hand in hand in warfare.

There is more, but that’s enough already.

Warrior self-destruction, aka moral injury, is one of two themes in the subtitle of Killing from the Inside Out. The second is the “just war” doctrine. And there too Meagher taught me something I never knew. It was invented by Saints Ambrose and

Augustine after Emperor Constantine became a Christian. He got to the top by warfare, he would stay there by the same means, and so would his baptized successors. Required now was a “Christian” doctrine of war. The two top theologians of the day went to work to create the “just war doctrine.”

Herewith several paragraphs in Meagher’s own words:

Timothy Kudo, a Marine captain who served in both Iraq and Afghanistan, published a piece in the Washington Post in January 2013, entitled “I killed people in Afghanistan. Was I right or wrong?” To many the question was indeed blasphemous and his answer to it proved still worse: “Killing is always wrong, but in war it is necessary.”

This simple statement. killing is always wrong, calls radically into question – none too soon in my view – a theory and doctrine firmly in place within Western ethical and theological orthodoxy for the past 1500 years: I have in mind here what we know as the just war doctrine. The deceptive and destructive core of the Christian just war doctrine can be stated very simply. It is the claim that wars, or at least some wars, and all the killing and destruction they entail, are—in addition to being necessary—good and right, even virtuous and meritorious, pleasing in the sight of God.

This calls for a new species or category of homicide: “killing” that is radically distinct from “murder,” a distinction that hadn’t previously existed in Christian ethics. “Murder” violates the will of God and darkens the soul of the murderer, but the other, “new” kind of killing doesn’t. The difference lies not in the level of violence, death, suffering, and destruction involved but in the “intention” of the killer. If the intention is to do the will of God, which the tradition identifies as the will of the Church and its ordained spokesmen or else the will of a legitimate secular sovereign authority, and if all is done with “love,” or at least not in hate, then there can be no moral injury because there has been no moral infraction, no sin. If

the intention is pure, all is well in heaven and so on earth. The origin of this foundational claim lay not in the New Testament, nor in early Christian theology and practice, but rather in a practical necessity and political convenience of Emperor Constantine. Once the Christian Church found itself in a position of power, which is to say that once the Roman Empire became the Holy Roman Empire, i.e., when Constantine, super-warrior, became a Christian, the exercise of lethal force and the waging of war, that is, killing, became its ecclesiastical responsibility.

In fact, service in the army, the imperial legions, was now confined to baptized Christians. How, then, could the Christian Church say that military service was sinful? How could it maintain and deploy an army of Christians whose very service put their souls at peril? A pacifist Church was one thing, but a pacifist Christian empire was something very different, and untenable.

Augustine, and his mentor Ambrose, both of whom had once aspired to a secular career in the imperial service, came up with the solution, a new theory of war and killing that would not only permit but endorse killing for "God and Country," as it were. It was from the beginning a doctrine of convenience—conceived, promulgated, and perpetuated by men who themselves, as clerics, men of God, would personally eschew service in the military and the conduct of war. They and their successors in the tradition would readily raise a hand to bless the troops but never themselves lift a hand to wield a sword or carry a rifle. There would be no blood on their hands. War and killing, now blessed, soon became not the lesser of two evils but a positive good.

Invented in a theological lab, just war and virtuous killing, as soon as they were tested in the field, proved useful for some and devastating to others. The "others" were the combatants, the killers and their victims. The shocking truth was that the "side effects" of just war on these lay, un-ordained "others" were of

little concern. Not even civilian casualties, however massive, were finally allowed to question its efficacy. Church and State were not about to condemn war, any more than they are today, not at least their wars; so war had to be good. Or rather, "our" wars have to be good, and those who serve in them do no wrong, ever, so long as they serve the cause and follow orders. As the great scholar-monk Erasmus pointed out centuries ago, every war is just, from the perspective of those waging it, and every killer is a hero, to the side they are on.

That is the wall our veterans still run up against today. They are expected to deny their own pain, ignore what war has taught them, and take up their civil status as heroes.

If they fear that they have lost their souls or their humanity or both, it is not because they have committed war crimes but because they have become convinced of the essential criminality of war. Surely there cannot be guilt and shame in having done their duty, served their country, at such a great risk and cost to themselves.

From the beginning of the just war tradition, the powers-that-be needed their wars and so they enlisted their heroes to wage them. Nothing about that has changed, including the confusion and resentment of the returning warrior at the reception he or she comes home to. It "baffle(s) him," writes Kevin Powers, an Iraq war veteran and author of the acclaimed novel *The Yellow Birds*, "because he immediately remembers what he has actually done, the acts of violence for which he's being thanked, and it just doesn't make sense. And he doesn't get to hide from the fact that he must account for what he's done."

The truth is that just war theory has never made sense to those with blood on their hands, nor to those whose blood it was. But to our great shame that fact has not been given much weight or mattered much, and has been largely ignored. After all, veterans represent less than one percent of the population.

The fact is that just war doctrine lies at the root of our

inability to comprehend moral injury and to make sense of our military “heroes” marching off to take their own lives. Why can’t our veterans see themselves as we see them – luminous in their service and lucky to have the rest of their lives ahead of them? Why can’t they leave the war behind?

The truth, of course, is that warriors bring their war home with them, not like a tan acquired on holiday but like a secret they wish they hadn’t been told. It is a secret the rest of us need to learn, even if we’d rather not, and a part of that secret is that, in the words of Captain Kudo, “Killing is always wrong.” I, for one, am grateful to him for summoning the courage to remind us all of this most inconvenient truth.

Thus far the Meagher citations.

If the depth diagnosis is sin, worse even than moral injury, then it’s a God-problem. Better said, a God-relation problem. In Christian theology there are two options for bringing sin’s tyranny to closure. One is the law: the wages of sin is death—even self-inflicted death. That does close the case. The other is Gospel, literally, a “good news” option: Christ’s death, his work and word of forgiveness. Forgiveness from God. Herewith an example of that: healing the “moral injury” of a Navy admiral, from the American Bible Society magazine that just showed up at our place.

A U.S. Navy Chaplain reports being called into the office of the admiral who orchestrated Navy operations across half the world. He looked weary. He took a deep breath and began to unload the burden from his 34 years of service in the military. “Ordering others to kill had taken a toll in him,” explains the chaplain, “it weighed on him very heavily.” The chaplain did what chaplains are called to do, hear confessions and offer absolution, God’s own forgiveness. “Tell God whatever you want to tell him.” At the end of the three-way conversation, we hear these words from the commander: “I feel like I lost 10 pounds. I’m forgiven. It’s incredible.”

One more that Marie and I heard came “live” from one of my former students, Air Force Chaplain Tom Unrath, when we visited him on duty at Cape Canaveral. A psychologist challenged him one day by saying, “You chaplains don’t do these airmen any good. You just make them feel guilty.” To which he replied, “No, you’ve got that wrong. They know they’re guilty, that’s why they come to me. But I can offer them forgiveness, which you can’t do.”

To eliminate war in our fallen world is something even Jesus didn’t achieve. So it’s unlikely that we will either. And yet, this axiom persists: Killers are sinners. The hundreds of veterans Meagher listened to said so. The Christians involved in the plot seventy years ago to assassinate Hitler agonized over that axiom. Just war theory gave them no help. They decided to attempt it, conscious that they were acting as sinners. Forgiveness was not their escape hatch to make it “okay.” One might say they agreed with Timothy Kudo. “Killing is always wrong, but killing Hitler is necessary.” So they were already sinners as they were plotting. They needed forgiveness, whether the attempt succeeded or not. Their attempt failed, and most of them were executed. The Christians among them died, so we have learned from Bonhoeffer, as confessed and forgiveness-trusting sinners.

Edward H. Schroeder

St. Louis, Missouri

13 October 2015

A Christian Approach to

Interfaith Relations

Colleagues,

Today's offering comes from Steven Kuhl, Executive Director of the Crossings Community. Steve has spent much of his working career as a pastor and professor in Greater Milwaukee, where he also serves as a member of the Unity and Relations Commission of the Wisconsin Council of Churches. In that capacity, he worked with four others to craft a document entitled "[Loving our Neighbors: A Statement of the Wisconsin Council of Churches on Interfaith Relations](#)" (November, 2014). What you'll see below is the part that Steve wrote.

No one crafts documents, of course, without reasons for doing so. Steve was kind enough to send along some background for this one, as follows:

"The question of how Christians should relate to their interfaith neighbors is not an abstract matter for the Christian churches of Wisconsin. The question came to a head in a very shocking and practical way for many Christians in 2012 with the [Oak Creek Sikh Temple shooting](#). Convinced that the Christian Churches of Wisconsin could no longer ignore the fact of religious diversity, suspicion, and prejudice in their local communities or the state at large, the [Wisconsin Council of Churches](#) set its sights on developing guidelines for helping Christians to enter into dialogue and better relate to their interfaith neighbors in a way that encompassed both Christian confessional integrity and civic/community unity. Since the Council consists of 19 member and observer denominations from assorted Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant traditions, no one knew what level of theological specificity or what kind of interpretive framework might be acceptable in this undertaking. As it turned out, the writers opted to rely squarely on the

Nicene Creed, with a particular focus on its distinction between what God does in general as Creator and what God does in Christ as Redeemer. With that as interpretive framework, the document that emerged was able to win a unanimous and enthusiastic reception from the Council's member and observer churches. It also got a very favorable response from various representatives of the Jewish, Hindu, Buddhist and Muslim communities."

This is hardly Steve's first foray into the ever-challenging topic of interreligious relationships. Those of us who attended the 2014 Crossings Conference heard him address it there with his invariable thoroughness, care, and astute Lutheran sensibility, in a paper entitled "[Proclaiming Christ Among the Religions: Interpreting Today's Pluralistic Impulse in Light of Christ's Singular Promise.](#)" For further sustenance over the next two weeks, I urge you strongly to check it out, along with [the other essays we feasted on](#) at that event, under the general topic of "Pluralism." It was rich fare indeed.

Peace and Joy,
Jerry Burce

Biblical and Theological Foundations: Love of God and Love of Neighbor

From the outset it must be understood that, for Christians, the goal of interfaith relationships is different from ecumenical relationships. Ecumenical relationships are established in the hope of fostering Christian unity; interfaith relationships are entered into primarily for the purpose of living in community. Christians enter into dialogue with one another so that we can cherish our common bond in Christ; Christians enter into interfaith dialogue so that we might be good neighbors with

everyone. Ecumenical relationships, therefore, are rooted in the second article of the Nicene Creed, in a common confession of Christ as God and Savior and the Trinitarian faith that binds Christians together:

*[We believe] ...in one Lord Jesus Christ,
the Only Begotten Son of God, born of the Father before all
ages.*

*God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God,
begotten, not made, consubstantial with the Father; through him
all things were made...*

For Christians, interfaith relationships are rooted in the first article of the Nicene Creed, a common experience of our humanity and the struggles of daily life that binds humanity together:

*We believe in one God, the Father Almighty,
Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and
invisible.*

Although both interfaith and ecumenical relationships have dialogue as their basic activity, respect as their basic approach, and mutual understanding as their basic hope, nevertheless, as noted above, the expectations of these relationships are quite different.

The biblical and theological foundation for this distinction in relationships is expressed in the two love commandments that Jesus presented as a summary of “all the law and the prophets.” Loosely quoted, the commandments are: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and mind... and love your neighbor as yourself” (cf. Mt 22:34-40, NRSV). It is helpful to focus on this text because of the favorable image it already has in interfaith dialogue. For example, in Christian-Muslim relationships, it is the primary text Islamic scholars used in their historic invitation to Christians to dialogue (“[A Common](#)

[Word between Us and You](#)," 2009). For our purposes, the text is important for the way it holds in tension two distinct but foundational principles central to interfaith relationships: freedom of conscience before God and unreserved respect of other persons.

What is striking about the first commandment concerning the love of God is its unconditional nature. But, here, care in interpretation must be taken. As the word of Christ, the commandment is not a demand that is being imposed on us, but an invitation that is being offered to us. The commandment teaches us about who God is. God is the One who can be loved absolutely, relied upon without reserve, and trusted with our whole being, sinful though we are. This God is the God revealed in Jesus Christ, who comes to a sinful, broken world not with new demands and accusations but with grace and mercy, carrying human sin and brokenness in his own body on the cross and conquering human sin and brokenness in his resurrection extending new life to all the world. The commandment is an invitation to love this God, teaching us, paradoxically, that the same God, who, through the law, condemns the world of sin, is the same God who, through the promises expressed by the prophets, redeems the world through Christ.

But the commandment also teaches that the act of loving this magnanimous God is a free act of conscience, a fruit of faith, a gift of the Holy Spirit. Any use of coercion—whether of a physical, social or psychological nature—to promote the love of God contradicts the commandment, the Christian understanding of God, and the nature of faith. Therefore, respect for religious freedom and the conscience or faith of others in religious matters is a foundational principle of Jesus' teaching on the love of God. While it is certainly appropriate for Christians to dialogue with others about the love of God in Christ and to invite them into that love as circumstances would have it, it is

an offense to the love of God to present it as a demand or to inject a coercive element into it. This kind of admonition to respect religious freedom occurs in various denominational statements on interfaith relations, ranging from the Vatican II document, "[Nostra Aetate](#)" (1965) to the American Baptist document, "[American Baptist Resolution on Interreligious Prejudice](#)" (2003).

What is striking about the second commandment concerning the love of neighbor is the unreserved respect, indeed, the complete identification it calls forth between Christians and their neighbors. Again, care must be taken in the interpretation of the text. Who is the neighbor? A neighbor is someone who is related to us by virtue of our placement in the world, not by virtue of our relationship to Christ. The relationship called "neighbor" is defined by the first article of the

Nicene Creed, the doctrine of Creation, not the second article, the doctrine of Christ. How are we as Christians to regard our neighbors? Answer: as ourselves, as fellow human beings created in the image of God and as co-stewards of God's creation, called to work together for the common good. Therefore, when the commandment urges us to love our neighbor as ourselves, it is urging us, above all, to work together with all people for the common good: my good, my neighbor's good, and the good of the whole creation.

To be sure, neighbors can certainly disagree on how they understand the common good. The commandment does not forbid such disagreement. Rather, what the commandment does is urge love, even in disagreement: love understood as unreserved respect for the other, even in disagreement, love understood as an exercise in civility in all things, even in disagreement. In addition, neither does the commandment forbid compromise in how we uphold the common good. It is certainly a basic part of civility and

respect of others to make compromises with our neighbors. But compromise by its very nature must be a free choice, and made with a good conscience. Therefore, only those of equal standing in open dialogue are in a position to make compromise with integrity. For this reason, the commandment to love our neighbor as ourselves presupposes a community of equals engaged in open dialogue. The commandment to love our neighbor as ourselves informs all aspects of human life together. In today's religiously diverse society, where religious disagreement is a given, unreserved respect for those of different religious traditions also needs to be a given. Treating neighbors who have differing religious outlooks as equal partners in a common human calling to promote the common good is a basic principle for governing interfaith relationships that is not only consistent with, but also commensurate with Christian belief.

From this reading of the love commandments, two basic principles emerge for understanding the relationship of the Christian Churches in the WCC to other religious traditions: freedom of religion and unreserved respect for the other as neighbor and equal. Working out the practical details of these principles can happen only in the context of respectful dialogue. Such dialogue takes place on many levels, from formal theological and scholarly dialogues at the institutional level to informal dialogues between neighbors at the local level.

Steven Kuhl
Milwaukee, Wisconsin

Three Distinctions to Make when Reading the Bible

Colleagues,

I began the last post (#860, September 10) by announcing a formal change in Thursday Theology's publication schedule, from weekly to bi-weekly. I start today by adding a clarification about the purpose for this exercise. It's long overdue. In fact I can't recall that anyone has ever spelled it out in all the seventeen years that Thursday Theology has been occupying its wee cranny of cyberspace. Ed Schroeder said nothing explicit about it when he penned the first-ever post in May, 1998. Nor did Robin Morgan, his collaborator at the time, when she wrote the second one a week later. After that came a weekly stream of essays and offerings, unbroken for at least thirteen years, almost all of them either written or edited by Ed, with Marie Schroeder serving behind the scenes as the top-flight copy-editor who kept grammatical, typographical, and stylistic blunders to a minimum. Most all of us who followed through all those years did so because Ed was Ed—sharp, provocative, and almost always able to teach us something we hadn't known before, especially in matters pertaining to how and why one confesses the faith as Lutherans get to do. Now and then we argued with him. It may have seemed at times along the way that he was simply venting. Few of us, if any at all, paused to ask what Ed was up to. That includes the little band of three—now down to one—who took up the mantle at the end of 2011, when Ed insisted he was done. Sure, we surmised some things about goal and purpose, and spelled them out when we introduced ourselves in [ThTheol 701](#). But looking back, our terms were too vague, and in some ways too ambitious for the talents we possessed.

In any case, we missed the point, that one unifying thread that tied Ed's body of work together, and frankly serves as the sole sufficient reason for our own present efforts. It came to me suddenly this week as an accidental gift from—who else?—Ed. Why Thursday Theology? To keep plugging away, with an unwavering and unrelenting focus, at the only question that finally matters, whether in theology or life: what is Jesus, crucified and risen, *for*? Or in Phillip Melanchthon's better phrasing, how do we make proper and thorough use of "the merits and benefits of Christ" (Apology IV). Is there anywhere else a current publication, be it online or papered, that zeroes in on this question as its sole *raison d'être*? I'm guessing not. I'll rejoice if I'm wrong.

In any case it occurs to me that it's time to add a defining tagline to every post: *De usus Christi*, for those of you who went to seminaries and got addicted to bandying bits of Latin about; or for those of you whose feet are planted more firmly on earth, "About putting Christ to use." I know, to some that will sound overweening and obnoxious (dare I say "Trumpish"?), as in "Who are you, wretched worm, to be *using* Christ?" Not so the Lord himself, who insists on his identity as Servant-In-Chief; and after that he shows his wounds to cowering worms and orders them unmistakably, with the authorizing breath of his Spirit, not to let those wounds go to waste (see John 20:19ff).

And there you have it: what Thursday Theology is for, and why, on this end, we'll do our best to keep cobbling it together and daring to send it to you in the hope that you'll read it. More on this, I trust, in the near future.

+ + +

Careful readers will see this matter of "using Christ" lurking in the background of today's offering. It comes from Pastor Jochen Teuffel of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Bavaria,

via Ed and Marie Schroeder, who translated it from German. Pr. Teuffel did a stint of teaching many years ago at a Lutheran seminary in Hong Kong, the one (currently of three) that relates to the Lutheran World Federation. That's where he and Ed crossed paths. The topic here is the Bible, and how to read it; and, pointedly, why reading it through the interpretive lenses that so-called "evangelical" Christianity insists on as a matter of dogma makes a hash of what's there. Also lurking in the background is the issue that seems to have prompted the essay, i.e. how the Bible gets used, in Germany as well as in America, when the talk turns to same-sex relationships. To appreciate that, be sure to click on the links you encounter as you read.

I should mention at the outset that Pr. Teuffel writes with a confessional bite. Some of you, shaped by current ELCA culture, may find this unsettling. Read through it anyway so you don't miss the heart and essence of the essay, those three important distinctions that serve, in all our encounters with the Bible, to keep Christ and his benefits in play.

Peace and Joy,
Jerry Burce

"The Bible says . . .": Why it is sometimes dangerous to equate "Word of God" with "Bible." **by Jochen Teuffel**

If someone is looking for evidence of militant Christian intolerance, one of the worst examples can be found in an early Protestant confessional document, the Reformed Church's Heidelberg Catechism of 1563. There we read Question #100: **"Is the blaspheming of God's Name by swearing and cursing such a grievous sin that God is angry also with those who do not**

prevent and forbid it as much as they can?" (1)

The catechism's answer, so radical that it horrifies us today, says: "Certainly, for no sin is greater or provokes God's wrath more than the blaspheming of His Name. That is why He commanded it to be punished with death." (2)

To support this death penalty for blasphemy the Heidelberg Catechism cites Leviticus 24:15-16: "Speak to the people of Israel, saying: Anyone who curses God shall bear the sin. One who blasphemes the name of the LORD shall be put to death; the whole congregation shall stone the blasphemer. Aliens as well as citizens, when they blaspheme the name, shall be put to death." (3)

How then should an "evangelical" Christian today object to a biblically-grounded death-commandment for blasphemy, when the Lausanne Covenant of 1974 says the following under the title "The Authority and Power of the Bible":

"We affirm the divine inspiration, truthfulness and authority of both Old and New Testament Scriptures in their entirety as the only written word of God, without error in all that it affirms, and the only infallible rule of faith and practice." (4)

For a thoughtful "Bible-believer" this short-circuit conclusion seems close at hand:

1. The Bible as the error-less Word of God is for Christians the only infallible rule of faith and practice.
2. The Bible says: Kill blasphemers.
3. Therefore Christians in obedience to God's Word are to kill blasphemers.

"But that can't be true!" every conscientious Christian would say. But how can we find solid grounds to counter that false conclusion? What can fulfill that task is the Book of Concord,

the confessional documents articulating the commitment of the Lutheran Church, beginning with the Augsburg Confession of 1530. In the introduction to the Epitome of the Formula of Concord, the final document in the Book of Concord, we read: "We believe, teach, and confess that the sole rule and standard according to which all dogmas together with [all] teachers should be estimated and judged are the prophetic and apostolic Scriptures of the Old and of the New Testament alone, as it is written, Ps. 119:105: 'Thy Word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path.' And St. Paul: 'Though an angel from heaven preach any other gospel unto you, let him be accursed,' Gal. 1:8."(5)

In the Book of Concord it is the canonical authority for the Holy Scriptures that is confessed, without thereby making any formal equation between Holy Scriptures and the Word of God. What is "canonical" authority? The key term in the Epitome is "standard" [*norma* in Latin, *Richtschnur* in German, possibly "yardstick" in English]. So the standard is not individual quotable Bible passages, but the canon, the Bible as a whole, which needs to be read "self-interpretively," in keeping with Martin Luther's dictum: "The Holy Scriptures interpret themselves" (his Latin: *sacra scriptura sui ipsius interpres*)."(6)

That the Holy Scriptures are not 100% the Word of God has to be evident to any Bible-reader, thanks to the clarity of the scriptures themselves. We read there not only words from God but also what God's word has achieved and brought about with humans; how humans respond to that; how they now and again contradict the Lord, dispute with him; how people, apparently godly people, say all sorts of things, and do not get God's approval (Job 42:7-9). Or again how even the devil takes the divine word into his own mouth to tempt Jesus in the wilderness (Matt. 4:5ff). All that is simply distorted if the entire Bible with no exception is identified as "God's Word."

There were historical grounds in Protestant confessional documents for equating Bible and Word of God. One was to counter the Catholicism arising after the Council of Trent in the 16th century. Another was to say “no” to modern historical-critical Biblical scholarship. As God’s authentic word the Bible in its entirety would appear to be elevated beyond historical criticism or churchly machinations. Understandable as this concern is, potential misunderstandings lurk in the background. Namely, making Bible and Word of God synonyms confuses divine inspiration with divine authorization. Not every specific word in the Bible comes divinely authorized. That is evident right away in a sentence embedded in the opening verse of Psalm 14: “There is no God”—definitely not a statement coming with divine authority, but the language of a fool’s heart, as the verse identifies it.

When the divine inspiration of the Holy Scriptures is taught, that means first of all that the wording of the “prophetic and apostolic Scriptures of the Old and of the New Testament” have not been transmitted to us thanks to human religious ingenuity, but for God’s own purposes. So we confess with [Balthasar Mentzeri](#) (1565-1627): “All that is needful for saving knowledge of God and for justifying faith and for leading a godly life, all that stands full and complete in the Holy Scriptures. Therefore they are claimed to be ‘the sole rule and standard’ [*Regel und Richtschnur*] of saving truth.” (7) The conviction that the canon is divinely inspired arises from the internal witness of the Holy Spirit when the Holy Scriptures are being read and in that reading God’s life-giving saving message is believed.

But for that very purpose distinctions within the scriptures are called for—eventually three distinctions.

The first distinction has already been mentioned. It refers to

the “**status**” of a Biblical text and poses the question: Is this particular Biblical word explicitly predicated to the triune God or does it signal that it comes from a human mouth? If it is the second, then a canonical interpretation [= according to the saving message permeating the entire Bible] is called for to distinguish whether this human-word conforms with God’s purposes and therefore counts as testimony for God’s own word, or has it gone astray on its own as a human word, possibly even a word that contradicts God’s own word.

The second distinction needed for God’s word as well as human testimony to God’s own word is this: Who is the **addressee** of this particular word? To whom is this word of God spoken? Is it a single individual (to Abraham in Genesis 22), the entire human race, the people of Israel, or else the church of Jesus Christ?

Martin Luther speaks directly to this in his sermon (August 27, 1525): “How Christians Should Regard Moses.”

One must deal cleanly with the Scriptures. From the very beginning the word has come to us in various ways. It is not enough simply to look and see whether this is God’s word, whether God has said it; rather we must look and see to whom it has been spoken, whether it fits us. That makes all the difference between night and day. God said to David, “Out of you shall come the king,” etc. [II Sam, 7:13]. But this does not pertain to me, nor has it been spoken to me. He can indeed speak to me if he chooses to do so. You must keep your eye on the word that applies to you, that is spoken to you, and not on the word that is spoken to someone else. The word in Scripture is of two kinds: the first does not pertain or apply to me, the other kind does. And upon that word which does pertain to me I can boldly trust and rely, as upon a strong rock. But if it do not pertain to me, then I should do nothing. The false prophets pitch in and say, “Dear people, this is the word of

God," That is true; we cannot deny it. But we are not the people to whom God is speaking. God has not called us to do this or that which he has commanded them to do. (8)

For good reasons Martin Luther, in his explanation of the third commandment in the Large Catechism, has said this about the Sabbath Commandment: "This commandment does not concern us Christians. It is an entirely external matter, like the other ordinances of the Old Testament connected with particular customs, persons, times and places, from all of which we are now set free through Christ." (9)

For Christian living under the Gospel, according to Luther, the Mosaic law is abrogated. It pertains only to the people of Israel. The only place where it connects with Christians is where the Mosaic law replicates the natural law of morality, for example in the Decalogue. There it does speak to Christians. "Thus I keep the commandments which Moses has given, not because Moses gave the commandment, but because they have been implanted in me by nature, and Moses agrees exactly with the law of nature, etc. But the other commandments of Moses, which are not implanted in all people by nature, the Gentiles do not hold. Nor do these pertain to the Gentiles." (10)

So even though a Biblical word has the "status" of Word of God, that does not yet render it valid for Christians until the addressee-question has been answered. Once more Luther: "Dear people, God spoke also to Adam; but that does not make me Adam. God commanded Abraham to put his son to death [Gen. 22:2]; but that does not make me Abraham and obligate me to put my son to death. God spoke also with David. It is all God's word. That is true. But let God's word be what it may, I must pay attention and know to whom God's word is addressed. But that is still a long way from making you the people with whom God has spoken."

(11)

The third fundamental distinction for Biblical Word of God is the “**mode**” of God’s speaking: is it law or gospel? Are we being addressed in our own sinfulness with a divine demand, impossible for us to fulfill, or are we receiving an unconditional saving promise in Jesus Christ calling us to trust him? Classic for this distinction is Luther’s tract “On Christian Freedom” of 1520:

How it can be the fact that faith alone justifies, and affords without works so great a treasure of good things, when so many laws, commandments, works, ceremonies, and directives are prescribed to us in the Scriptures? I answer, Before all things bear in mind what I have said: that faith alone without works justifies, sets free, and saves, as I shall show more clearly below. Meanwhile it is to be noted that the whole Scripture of God is divided into two parts: the commandments or the law of God and the promises or pledges of God. The commandments teach and spell out for us all sorts of good works, but that doesn’t make them happen. For they show us what we ought to do, but they give no help. They do not give us the power to do it. They were ordained, however, for the purpose of showing man to himself, that through them he may learn his own inability for good and may despair of his own strength. . . . he is constrained to despair of himself and to seek elsewhere and through another the help which he cannot find in himself. . . .

Now when a man has through the commandments been taught to discover his own incapability, and become anxious by what means he may satisfy the law—for the law must be satisfied . . . otherwise he must be hopelessly condemned—then, being truly humbled and brought to nothing in his own eyes, he finds in himself no resource for his own justification.

Then comes in that other part of Scripture, the promises and pledges of God, which declare the glory of God, and say, "If you wish to fulfill the law, and, as the law requires, get rid of evil desires and sin, look up! Believe in Christ, in whom I promise you grace, righteousness, peace, and freedom. When you believe, you have them. When you don't, you don't. For what is impossible for you by all the works of the law, which are many and yet of no benefit, that will be easy and simple through faith. For I have made everything to depend on faith, so that whosoever has it has all things, and he who has it not has nothing." Thus the promises of God give that which the commandments require, and fulfill what the law calls for, so that all is of God alone, both the commandments and their fulfillment. He alone commands; He alone also fulfills. (12)

+ + +

With these inner-biblical distinctions of "status" (God's word or human word), "addressee" (individual person, humanity, people of Israel or church of Jesus Christ) and "mode" (law or gospel) we can now address that question #100 in the Heidelberg Catechism: "Is cursing and swearing by God's name such a severe sin, that God is also angry with those who do nothing to prevent it?"

Indeed holding God's name "holy" is part and parcel of the Christian faith, for we pray in the "Our Father" in the very first petition "Hallowed be thy name." And the second commandment of the Decalogue is focused there too: "You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name." (Exodus 20:7).

And yet the Heidelberg Catechism with its kill-command for blasphemers contradicts the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Jesus finally took the blasphemy charge upon himself on the cross, as Saint Paul testifies: "Christ has redeemed us from the curse of

the law by becoming a curse for us; for it is written 'Cursed is every one who hangs on a tree.'" (Galatians 3:13).

Where the trinitarian God has taken upon himself the blasphemy of the divine name (and the name "Jesus" is the Greek-rendering of the Hebrew "Jeshuah," which means "The LORD is salvation.") there the death penalty has been repealed. The wrath of the cross-blasphemed deity presents no earthly danger. Consequently there are no judicial grounds for governmental action against blasphemy, such as Emperor Justinian did in 538 A.D. with his "[Novel 77](#)" in the (now "Christian") Roman Empire. He ordered the death penalty for blasphemers "so that from the contemptuous action of such persons the city and state not suffer damage from their sinful behavior."(13)

Even if the death penalty is divinely prescribed throughout the book of Leviticus, Christians are exempt from it. This mandate applies exclusively to the people of Israel, people of the Mosaic covenant, not to Christians. Whoever calls for Christians to adopt a death penalty for blasphemy, or simply approves of that policy, abrogates Christ's substitutionary death-under-the-curse and puts himself in opposition to the gospel.

When you equate Word of God and the Bible, you have no resource for countering the false conclusion, supposedly "being faithful to the Bible," that blasphemers be put to death. When no distinctions are made in discussions about God's Word in the Bible, individual texts go off on their own, get isolated and exempted from canonical interpretation.

People are tempted to appropriate those Bible passages that agree with their own convictions. Whatever a person believes he already possesses, he no longer needs to have spoken to him. Therefore the formula "The Bible says . . ." soon becomes the gateway for one's own Un-faith. The devil too knows how to use

that formula.

The distinctions—status, addressee, mode—when dealing with Biblical texts do not do violence to the canon. Rather they serve the authority of the Holy Scriptures. They need not be applied slavishly, mechanically, but prove themselves in the context of ongoing reading of the Scriptures. Throughout our entire lifetime, we never come to the end of our reading the Holy Scriptures. In order to retain the Word of God that we have read, retain it in faith, we need to read on coherently. This is the very invitation of Martin Buber, Jewish philosopher of religions:

“The Bible seeks to be read as One Book, so that no one of its parts remains self-contained; rather every part is held open to every other. The Bible seeks to be present as One Book for its readers so intensely that in reading or reciting an important passage they recall all the passages connected to it, and in particular those connected to it by linguistic identity, resemblance, or affinity; so intensely that all these passages illuminate and explain one another, that they cohere into a unity of meaning.” (Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig, *Scripture and Translation*, trans. L. Rosenwald with E. Fox (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 91.)

When the Holy Scriptures are read interconnectedly, the words are in a sense “relativized,” but not in terms of human fantasy. Rather they are “relativized” into relationship with Jesus Christ, of whom we read in the opening verses of the Letter to the Hebrews:

“Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. He is the reflection of God’s glory and the

exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word. When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs." (Hebrews 1:1-4)

[Author's footnotes are all from German-language sources, and are available upon request. For English-language readers many of the sources are readily available on the Internet under their respective titles. E.g., Lausanne Covenant. Book of Concord, Epitome. Luther: Large Catechism, On Christian Freedom, How Christians Should Regard Moses.]

"Third Use," Round Two. A Citation from Luther

Colleagues,

I start today by announcing a formal change in Thursday Theology. A weekly post, which has not been so weekly of late, is shifting to a biweekly format. I discussed this with other members of the Crossings Board when we met last month, pointing out that gifts granted to Thursday Theology's first author and editor, Ed Schroeder, were not doled out in equal measure to the team that took up the mantle when Ed laid it down in November, 2011, after an astonishing run of 700 posts, nary a week missed. That team, three in the beginning, has now dwindled to one, the undersigned, who writes at about a tenth the speed that Ed seems still to manage. Meanwhile there's that pesky matter of a full-time call to other responsibilities that require something like

Thursday Theology to be treated as at most an avocation, a thing for whatever extra hours one dares to call one's own.

So we shift gears. Going forward I will do my best to get something on its way to you every other week. I'll write essays as I'm able. Steven Kuhl has promised to pitch in on a regular basis. Contributions like the one you're getting this week, from Timothy Hoyer, will be gladly received and vetted for publication. The aim throughout will be to keep the postings fresh, lively, somehow useful, and steadily consistent. God grant the will and mental wherewithal to make that happen.

As for this week's offering, it's one of two items that came my way in response to the last post you got, dated August 13, wherein Ed Schroeder channeled Werner Elert on the Formula of Concord's discussion of the Third Use of the Law. On reading that, Tim Hoyer, pastor at Gloria Dei Lutheran Church, Lakewood, New York, promptly dug up a passage from *Luther's Works* to buttress Elert's contention that Luther had no truck with "third use" thinking. It seemed a good thing to chew on, so I pass it along for your consideration, bookended with Pr. Hoyer's own comments.

I mentioned in my introduction to the August 13th piece that "third use" continues to be a contentious topic among Lutherans. I have friends and colleagues, as mad for Augsburg-style Gospel as anyone I know, who will bristle at a thing or two they read here, not so much in Blessed Martin as in Pr. Hoyer's commentary. So why the contention, and its refusal to die? I have some half-baked views on that. Assuming the oven stays on and the baking proceeds, I'll bring the results to a presentation I'm scheduled for at next January's Crossings conference. The topic of the conference is "Law, Gospel, and the Holy Spirit," with a focus on the "double life" that Christians enjoy and suffer—yes, both of these—by virtue of their birth on

the one hand, their baptism on the other. We'll be hearing from an impressive range of speakers. [See here](#) for details. You'll want to join us, I trust. I hope you can.

Peace and Joy,
Jerry Burce

Luther on the Ministries of Moses and Christ, of Law and Gospel

Selection and Commentary by Timothy Hoyer

Precis

In a lecture on Deuteronomy 18:15, Luther uses “the double dipstick” to show why the law must decrease so that Christ, the new Prophet, may increase. In other words, a) Christ is honored, his death and rising are used, to b) bring comfort to consciences who fear the law's demands for our death. Also, he teaches how Law and Gospel have their God-given roles, different roles, and both are needed. I argue that the third use of the law changes the God-given roles of the Law and the Gospel, thus burying Christ, that is, thus taking away the need for Christ's death and rising for us.

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From *Lectures on Deuteronomy*

Luther's Works, Vol. 9, trans. Richard R. Caemmerer, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1960), 176-180

18:15. The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brethren—Him you shall heed.

It is [Moses'] purpose to show that in the future there will be

another priesthood, another kingdom, another worship of God, and another word, by which all of Moses will be set aside. (176)

This Prophet...he does not dare subordinate to himself and put his words into His mouth; but he says that He will be like him in service and obedience, by which he certainly excludes Him from obedience to him and places Him above all prophets who taught on the basis of Moses.

But to exclude Him from obedience to Moses and to prefer Him above all prophets teaching on the basis of Moses is to affirm positively that the ministry of the Law is to be ended and a new one to be set up, since no man [sic] is free from the service the Law but all are subject to the Law. Therefore it is necessary that this Prophet, who is like Moses—in respect to authority of teaching and commanding, that is, for that is what he means when he says ‘like me’—be superior to Moses and teach greater things. (177)

If, therefore, the doctrine of both is considered, it will be easily apparent from the comparison of their doctrine what [the new Prophet] must preach. Moses is a minister of the Law, sin, and death; for he teaches and stresses works, and through the rays of the Law he makes everyone guilty of death and subject to punishment for sin. He demands, but he does not give what he demands. However, since this Prophet finds Moses teaching this and is Himself set up as a Teacher next to Moses, His Word must teach something else. But He cannot teach anything else than sin, wrath, and death unless He teaches righteousness, grace, and life. Therefore it is necessary that He be a teacher of life, grace, and righteousness, just as Moses is a teacher of sin, wrath, and death. But both teachings must be heard just and they have been raised up by God; for through the Law all must be humbled, and through the Gospel all must be exalted. They are alike in divine authority, but with respect to the fruit of

their ministry they are unlike and completely opposed to each other. The sin and wrath which Moses arouses through his ministry that Prophet cancels through righteousness and grace by His ministry. This Prophet, therefore, demands nothing; but He grants what Moses demands.

In this passage we have those two ministries of the Word which are necessary for the salvation of the human race: the ministry of the Law and the ministry of the Gospel, one for death and the other for life. They are indeed alike if you are looking at their authority, but most unlike if you are thinking about their fruit. The ministry of Moses is temporary, finally to be ended by the coming of the ministry of Christ, as he says here, "Heed him." But the ministry of Christ will be ended by nothing else, since it brings eternal righteousness and 'puts an end to sin,' as it is said in Dan. 9.24. . . .

From all this it follows how completely foreign and even pestilential those teachers in the New Testament are who trouble consciences with laws and works, when this prophecy concerning Christ totally wipes out and does away with that ministry. (178-9)

But here you will say: "You will find commands everywhere in the gospels and the epistles of the apostles. Therefore either our Christ will not be this Prophet, or His doctrine will not differ at all from the Law of Moses." To reply briefly: The commands of the New Testament are not directed to those who are justified and are new men [sic] in the Spirit. Nothing is taught or commanded there except what pertains solely to believers, who do everything spontaneously, not from necessity or contrary to their own will. But the Law is directed to the old man, who is dead in sin, to urge him on and to show him his sin. This is the true and proper teaching of the Law. Therefore the Law finds man not only unwilling but also unable to do what the Law demands. .

. . .

The understanding of this matter lies in recognizing and truly distinguishing the Law and the Gospel, that you may know that the teaching of the Law commands only what is to be done by the ungodly and lost, as 1 Tim 1:9 says: 'The Law is not laid down for the just but for the lawless.' But where the godly are, there the Law, which is intended only for the humiliation of the ungodly through the recognition of their sin and weakness, is already abolished. The Gospel teaches from what source you receive the power to fulfill the Law. In this respect it commands nothing; nor does it force the spirit, which hastens of its own accord by faith. It adds some commands, but it does so to kill the remnants of the old man in the flesh, which is not yet justified. From these commands, however, the spirit is free, being satisfied with faith alone. Of this matter we have spoken amply elsewhere. (179-80)

[Footnote appended to the last sentence above, presumably by Caemmerer or Pelikan: In contradiction to the antinomians Luther taught the preaching of the Law was still necessary for Christians—not indeed as a set of prescriptions for the Christian life (the so-called “third use of the Law”) but as a continuing chastisement of the flesh that still adhered to the Christian. (180)]

+ + +

Commentary

If a Christians desires to be shown how they still need Christ, yes, that is what the Law does in its true and proper function. But that is not a third use, but the very essence of what the Law does.

But Jesus did not always use the Law to show his disciples that they needed him. Nor did Paul always use the Law to correct the

behavior of Christians (which really means to restore their faith in Jesus). Here are some examples to support that statement.

Jesus told his disciples that he had to suffer, die, and be raised on the third day. Then, as they walked along, the disciples argued about who of that group was the greatest. When Jesus asked them about their conversation and they told him, Jesus did not quote the Law to them and condemn them, rather, he told them that in his kingdom, to be great means to serve, to be last. It was as if he was saying that when faith in him acts, it acts in love, in sacrifice, in caring for others, not for one's self. Faith in Jesus who is crucified is not about being great in earthly terms, but to be great in terms of the cross.

When Paul had to deal with the Christians in Corinth and their lack of partiality in greeting people, he did not use the law to humble them, but instead he said that their behavior did not honor Jesus and his way of welcoming all people subject to the law and suffering from the law.

Then Paul had to convince the Christians in Galatia that following the law, even one part of it, was not the way Jesus had given them. What Jesus had given them was freedom, as in, "For freedom Christ has set us free! Do not return to the old way of slavery." "If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit." That is to say, "Let the Spirit guide is in how we are to live in relationship to God and in relationship to one another. In our relationship with God, the Spirit gives us Christ; the Spirit "call, gathers, and enlightens" us with Christ's new mercy management, that righteousness, grace, and life. In our relationship with one another, our faith acting in love, the Spirit gives us love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, generosity, truthfulness, and self-control. Against those there is no law. We too get to manage our relationships

with mercy.

The old person in us that remains still needs the Law to put it to death so that we can be raised up in faith in Jesus. But once raised in Jesus, faith is not helped by the Law. Faith is encouraged, guided, enlightened by the Gospel, by telling us again of mercy and Christ dying and rising for us, by reminding us to honor Christ instead of Law or pride or partiality.

As the law is replaced, put to an end, temporary, because of Christ, since Christ is the end of the law, how can the law still have a function for the one who trusts Christ? The law is gone for those who are new in Christ. Here the Gospel shapes and guides us and gives us faith in Christ, and it is faith that is first needed before we do works. It is for the ungodly that the Law still does its rightful function of causing us to fear its harsh words so much that we long for a kinder voice. And all, even those who trust Christ, still have that sin in us, that original condition that cannot trust God and Christ. The Law puts it to death daily so that faith in Christ may live in us, guide us, and give us hope.

Timothy Hoyer
Lakewood, New York

A “Third Use” of the Law? Doest the Formula Say That?

Does the Notion Make Sense?

Colleagues,

This week's offering is the burnished version of a note Ed Schroeder dashed off a week or so ago to Pastor Samuel Wang of the Lutheran Church of Singapore. He's responding to a concern Pr. Wang raised about an old Thursday Theology post ([#459, 19 Mar. 2007](#)) in which Timothy Hoyer asserts that the so-called "third use" of the law as a guide for Christian behavior puts baptized people at odds with Christ. In asking Ed to clarify, Pr. Wang observed that this appears to contradict what the [Formula of Concord](#) has to say on the subject. He wondered if Pr. Hoyer's view might surface at a Crossings conference that's being planned for Singapore sometime next year. He hoped not. It would stir up controversy, he said.

Thus Ed's comments below. In writing to Pr. Wang he's addressing a former student (at Trinity Theological College, Singapore, 2004), a good friend of Crossings (two trans-Pacific trips so far for our conferences in Belleville, Illinois), and a current doctoral candidate (at the Lutheran Church of Australia's theological institution in Adelaide). He's also touching on a neuralgic topic that continues, the Formula notwithstanding, to stir passions among serious Lutherans today, certainly in the U.S. I wish I could say the passions were pleasant. They tend not to be. Now and then they've surfaced even within our own Crossings community.

For readers who aren't familiar with Lutheran theological jargon, a quick word about the "uses" of the Law. As far I know, Lutherans are unanimous in agreeing about two of them. First, it controls sinners. It keeps them from running amok and ruining the world. It preserves God's old creation. Insiders often refer to this as the "political" use. Next, it exposes sinners for the

rebellious creatures they are, and cannot help but be. It accuses them. It gets their backs up, it throws them on the defensive, it aggravates their sinning to the point that even they begin to notice that they really don't like God, and that God for God's part has every good reason to put them to death. Here the insider term is the "theological" use. Comes the argument. When sinners learn to know and trust Christ and fall under the rubric of "new creation" (2 Cor. 5:17), does the law operate on them and for them in a different way, a third way?

Here I punt to Ed. In doing so, a word of thanks to Steve Hitchcock of [Bread for the World](#) for turning Ed's email prose into standard English, and to Marie Schroeder for some further editing and polishing. ☺☺Peace and Joy,☺Jerry Burce

On the Third Use of the Law: Edward H. Schroeder to Samuel Wang

Dear Sam,

I'll say a few things about the third use of the law, namely the notion that the Decalogue or Ten Commandments – along with their elaboration in Deuteronomy and elsewhere – provides guidance and instruction to Christians.

1. Werner Elert helped me to see that the presentation of the third use of the law in Article 6 of Formula of Concord (FC 6) was an attempt by second generation Lutherans to resolve the differences between what Luther said and what Melanchthon said about a third "job" that God's law does. The prose of FC 6 is circuitous, sometimes tortured. If I remember aright, Elert said: FC 6 starts out with

Melanchthon's view and ends with Luther's. But "perfectly clear" it is not.

2. The "full story" on that lack of clarity is the section on Third Use in Elert's monograph (which I translated and Fortress published years ago) *Law and Gospel*.
3. Elert said that, in discussing *usus* (a Latin legal term), it is important to know its meaning in late medieval German jurisprudence. What is important is who has the right to "use" something. Who has ownership of an item? Either de facto ownership by having it in his own hand or delegated "interim" ownership and therefore the right to "use" it?
4. And from that, so I think, comes the clear understanding that *God alone* has the "right" to use God's law. So any talk about *our* using God's law for anything, as though we had it in our hand to do something with it, is misinformed. At worst, we usurp ownership away from God over something that does not belong to us.
5. It's clear from *usus* #1 and *usus* #2 that God is the "owner," the one doing the using. Thus it is God preserving his first creation (also preserving sinners in that creation) and God critiquing us for being sinners.
6. And, for Luther, the law was not simply the Ten Commandments or any set of rules or instructions. Rather the law – as it both preserves and accuses – is the way the world works. The law is the web of relationships and even the structure of creation in which quid pro quo is the operating system. The law is "justice" in the sense that, in life, you get what you earn or deserve. And when you don't earn or deserve, then there are consequences.
7. So God uses his law on sinners, but "only" on sinners. That includes the old Adam present in every baptized sinner. But what about the New Man or Woman in Christ? That is the tough cookie that FC 6 wrestles with – and

sometimes “waffles.”

8. Since “the law *always* accuses” (Melanchthon himself said that! In Apology 4 of the Augsburg Confession!), there is no way for the law to be non-condemnatory. But it is impossible for the law to accuse a Christ-truster, the New Man or New Woman, since that person is Christ-covered. Ergo, righteous. When we trust that, in Christ, we are new beings, there is nobody on the scene for God’s law to accuse. At Easter, God confirms Jesus’s “forgiveness” verdict, says this sinner is sin-free – so also law-free, free from condemnation. Isn’t that what the entire Galatians epistle is about? And half of Romans too? I think so.
9. And why would the only One who has *rightful use* of God’s law even think of accusing one of his own children who now carries the Christ-cover – one who has “put on the Lord Jesus Christ” and is now wearing the clothes of the righteousness of God’s own “only beloved Son”?
10. If Christ-covered sinners do need ethical counsel for living out the New Life in Christ, then two things are to be noted.
 - A. God’s law – as in the Decalogue or Ten Commandments – good and valid in its own place, is *ignorant* about the New Life in Christ. It is clueless as an ethical adviser for how to live that NEW Life.
 - B. The New Testament expressions for the ethical adviser for Christ-trusters come in two forms: “Following Christ” and “Being Led by the Holy Spirit.” St. Paul tells us, “the Lord is the Spirit and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom” (2 Corinthians 3:17). Thus these two “ethical advisors” are fundamentally one and the same counselor.

In John’s Gospel, both are called *parakletos* or the

“Counselor” (John 14: 16). *Parakletos* is a Greek legal term for defense attorney, as in legal counsel. But in this case, the Counselor offers “Gospel counsel,” a different sort of ethical “counsel.”

In our Crossings crowd we’ve gotten used to calling this ethical *paraenesis* (exhortation) the “Second Use of the Gospel.” Thus there are two uses for the Law (preserving and critiquing), two for the Gospel (redeeming and sanctifying, salvation and ethics).

11. There are sub-sections (31 and 33) in Elert’s *Christian Ethos* on these two counselors for new-creation ethics when one’s ethos is “Ethos under Grace.”

A. The new ethos (“following Christ”) is real, not imaginary. It is grounded in a forgiveness verdict, and thus *we live in grace by continuous connection with Christ*. “Lord and Master” are two terms the New Testament uses for this connection. Christ’s lordship is not “legalistic lordship” (Latin: *imperium*, to rule as emperor). Rather his is a “gracious lordship” (Latin: *dominium*, ruling as a servant). As our “master” (teacher) Jesus does not “teach” us what we are to do. Rather Jesus IS what we are to do. And Christ’s teaching (Christ as master) continues after his ascension, throughout history.

B. “Being led by the Spirit” is St. Paul’s alternative to “following the Law.” “For all who are led by the Spirit are children of God” (Romans 8:14). It is the creative work of the Holy Spirit in Christians (the Counselor in John’s Gospel). This work is tangible, but some of it is manifest only to the eye of faith. When the apostles speak of the Holy Spirit, they do not refer to psychological processes at all, but

rather something that happens from outside myself, some of which all can see. But the full picture of what all is going on – the Spirit’s generating a whole new existence for former sinners – is perceptible only to the “pneumatic” person, the one animated by this Holy Spirit coming from Christ.

C. St. Paul summarizes the paragraphs above in just two sentences with his opening words in Romans 8: “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the ‘law’ [your new master] of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law [old master] of sin and death.” Which brings to mind Jesus’ own words: “No one can serve two masters” (Matthew 6:24). It’s either/or.

12. Another manifestation of the confusion over the third use of the law is talk about “preaching the law.” Nowhere in the New Testament is the verb “preach” ever followed with “the law” as its object. In fact, New Testament Greek has no word for “preach” at all. In English translations of the Greek New Testament, the verb “preach” is used in an attempt to translate the Greek terms *euaggelizein* and *keryssein*. In Greek, those two words are themselves nouns-made-into-verbs. So “Speak euaggelion, speak kerygma. Gospel-ize people, Message them.” And when it comes to the Law, it is better, I think, is to say God “gives” the law, administers the law (with his left-hand, ala Luther). Indeed, God *inflicts* the law, *imposes* the law.
13. Those Greek verbs about “preaching” the Gospel do point to something important: *human speech*. God’s Gospel and God’s Law are polar opposites at several levels. Here what is opposite is that God’s Law is always in force, on the scene, in action (like the law of gravity) – *even if no one ever says a word about it*. Not so the Gospel. If the

Good News is not inserted – as proclamation or as sacramental speech/action – it is not present, not on the scene at all. Without the speaking of the Gospel, then the only God operation at work is God's Law – God at work preserving while also critiquing us and our world.

14. And it's also the case that God's Law already exists and fully functions in the existing state of the creation. *No human brings the law on the scene.* Like physicians diagnosing a patient, human beings can only "read the chart" of what's already going on and then point that out to people who are otherwise unaware of the Law's presence, its action, and its consequences.
15. Humans do come into the picture as agents of God, also as agents of God's Law. So do many other of God's creatures. Luther once saw a leaf falling from a tree and heard that leaf as a messenger of God telling him, "You too shall die." So creatures can be, yes, are, agents that God uses to do his left-hand work of preserving the creation and critiquing sinners. But when it comes to "using" the Law on Christ-trusters, if God never does "third use" work on those Christ-trusters, then we humans can hardly be God's agents for something God himself does not do.

So it seems to me.

Cheers!

Ed