

# The Word Became This Flesh

Colleagues,

This is John 1 season. We sampled it on the Third Sunday of Advent (1:6-8, 29-28). The main course followed on Christmas Day (1:1-14). Where I do most of my work, a pesky saint has finally prevailed on me to tackle the Gospel of John in the Sunday morning Adult Education class. I consented with fear and trembling. John astonishes me. It annoys me too. In either case I find it requiring a heap of hard labor to follow what's going on, and after that to hear how God is speaking through it to me, or to the people God sends me to with a current item of good news for them. I'm much more at ease with Matthew and Mark, and to a lesser extent with Luke.

Be this as it may, John is ever rewarding, and at times surpassingly so. I've been learning that again these past few weeks, with lots of help from Raymond E. Brown, the late great Jesuit scholar whose two-volume commentary on John leaves one gasping at its comprehensiveness and erudition, to say nothing of its graciousness. I'm thinking here especially of the tone that Brown adopts toward the raft of other scholars he's in constant conversation with, among them some who seem to me to have said some spectacularly silly things. In this, Brown is a model for those of us who, fifty years after he wrote, are trapped in less polite days. Thus too does one's light so shine, as Matthew might put it (cf. Mt. 5:16). John would say it like this: thus too do we love each other as Christ has loved us all (cf. Jn. 13:34).

Here are a couple of other items I've picked up from Brown so far that others of you might have missed along the way as well:

1. The only occurrences in John of the word "grace"—*charisin*

Greek—are in the Prologue, 1:1-18. After that John's key word for God's attitude toward us is "love." This leads Brown to use "love" as the translation for *charis* in his own rendering of the Prologue. Of even more interest is how he turns the phrase that others transmit as "grace and truth." It occurs twice, in 1:14 and 1:17. In both places Brown gives us "enduring love," as in "we have seen his glory...filled with enduring love." Behind that lies a supposition that John is using *charis* and *aletheia* (usually "truth") as equivalents for a pair of Old Testament Hebrew words that are often rendered in English as "steadfast love." It's an intriguing idea, even for this Lutheran who is quick to point out that God's truth is a sword with two edges, one of which is serrated. Still, Promise trumps Law, and of all the truth that presents itself in Christ to God's everlasting glory in Christ, that's the piece John drives us to grab hold of at last with a fierce determined faith. See the climactic episode with Thomas in chapter 20. So yes, methinks that Brown is onto something here. I pass it on for your mulling too.

2. Of equal interest is a key item that our usual English hides. In Greek, it's transparent. So too in Jerome's Latin, and to some extent (I think) in Luther's German. John famously starts "In the beginning was the Word..." The verb is a past tense, third person singular, of *eimi*, "I am." You got it, Name of God, heavily featured throughout John's Gospel, as in "...before Abraham was, I am" (8:58). [A new translation of the New Testament](#) hit the market in September. The person behind it, David Bentley Hart, argues that "the Word" is wholly inadequate for the task of conveying whatever first-century types were thinking about when they heard the Greek *logos*. His solution is to stick with the Greek. "In the origin was the Logos, and

the Logos was present with God, and the Logos was god;"—that's how he does it, with an extended footnote to explain himself, not least when it comes to typography. I wonder if a simpler solution might be to throw "word" into small caps, after the convention followed by Old Testament translators when they bump into God's proper name as Israel knew it: the Lord. Thus too in John 1: the Word. Why not?

But back to our story. The Word "was." Through this Word all things "were made." Here the verb *isegeneto*, a past tense of *ginomai*, and better rendered as "came to be," or "happened." (Homiletical sidebar: "No, you addled moderns, stuff doesn't 'just happen'; it happens always and only through the Word. Or to crib from Luther, 'I believe that God is *still* creating me and all creatures....'"). Anyway. A few lines further John tackles the matter of the Baptist's relation to the Word, and here's where the English bungles it. "There was a man sent from God whose name was John" (NRSV and most others). Big oops. The verb is *egeneto*, a clear and vivid contrast to the unadorned "was" of the Word, verse 1. Here a man happens. A man comes to be. Said man, sent by God, happens *through* the Word like everything else except the Word, excepting too the God with whom the Word was and is and always will be. No wonder the Baptist will soon confess that he's not worthy to unlace Jesus' sandals (1:27).

And now the stunner: "The Word became—*egeneto*—flesh...." This is John's terser equivalent of the self-emptying that Paul sings about in Philippians 2, using the same verb: "Not regarding equality with God a thing to be grasped, he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, 'happening'—*genomenos*—into human likeness." In American slang, one calls this a huge come down. The Doer is suddenly done to. He Who Was is now another of the billions who merely come to be. The Word and the Baptist now share the same predicament. Paul's image for the predicament is

slavery; and if he's thinking here with the same mind that spilled out Galatians, then he's describing the unhappy situation of a person bound by Law. Stuff happens to that person whether she likes it or not, and behind the stuff is the One who drives all happening.

John's image is even grimmer. Enfleshment. That's plainer English for "incarnation," a word I dodge these days in any conversation that doesn't involve a stuffy liturgist or theologian, and even then I'm chary of using it. The word has been ruined by many centuries of pious pictures showing that ever so clean and healthy crowd clustered around the glowing baby in the manger. That's not the mood John means to convey when he says the Word was bundled into *sarx-carnis* in Latin. Or in rock-bottom English, "meat," as a friend and colleague pointed out some weeks ago. My meat. Your meat. Dead meat, now walking, now not. Though even then, I think, we fail to grasp the appalling, wondrous scandal of the thing—its glory, as the Holy Spirit, working through John, would have us see.

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I took this scandal up last Monday in my Christmas Day sermon. I dare now to share it with you even though it begs for another several drafts to satisfy my own expectations of what a sermon needs to do. Still, there may be something here already that others find helpful. It also affords me a chance to introduce some of you to one Anton Lutz, a 2003 graduate of Valparaiso University and a winner, this year, of one of the university's Alumni Community Service awards. (I and others had nominated him for the Outstanding Young Alumnus award, but there it is.)

Anton is as sharp a lay theologian as Valparaiso has ever produced, I think. He's a doer too, or, more specifically, a fearless doer-in-Christ for the sake of the least and the lost,

and his doing is these days especially courageous. It was featured recently [in the Huffington Post](#). Anton uses Facebook as a tool for his work. One of his recent posts included the photo you'll read about it in the sermon. Oddly, I've seen photos by the tens of thousands that could have done what this one did. I saw all too many last May at Yad Vashem, the Israeli Holocaust memorial. But why and how the penny drops when at last it does is another of those mysteries that defies explanation. That the Word became flesh is good and essential news also for the slow and stupid.

Anton could use your prayers. The lost and the least he's trying to rescue could use them even more. So could the folks who, in subsequent drafts, would get more mention in the sermon. I mean the agents and perpetrators of the evil that injures others so cruelly. Theirs too is the flesh the Word got draped in. To think of it stuns the mind. It pushes the meaning of grace-and-truth to the breaking point, or beyond.

Peace and Joy,  
Jerry Burce

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## **The Word Became *This* Flesh**

A Christmas Day Sermon

+ In Nomine Jesu +

"And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of the Father's only son, full of grace and truth." –*John 1:14*

Any more these words roll easily from the tongue. Too easily. That's what happens when you've been working on and off with a great text like this for a few decades. You learn it. You get

used to it. You stop probing it to see what lies inside. After a while the words don't astonish you anymore. They don't snatch your breath away.

Then comes something like the pictures I saw on Facebook last week. They were taken in the highland valleys I got to know as a missionary's kid in Papua New Guinea. I later roamed them as a young pastor in my first call. The photos showed up in the feed of a man my children's age who was also the son of a missionary. His dad was a doctor. Like me, the young man went to college in the U.S. and then went home to a place Americans aren't supposed to think of as home, though a few of us do. A very few. He's been working there for over a decade as a lay missionary, building airstrips, tutoring church workers, combatting an AIDS epidemic, and lately, leading a fight against sorcery. Or to put that more accurately, he's been challenging a surging belief in sorcery, and doing his best to rescue the victims of that belief.

The victims are almost all women. Tortured women. I mean that quite literally. Someone dies. Someone else claims that a witch was responsible. A culprit is identified. That person is seized. A crowd, composed mostly of men, tries to force a confession from her with fire and sharp steel.

The pictures I saw were of a woman this happened to. She was covered with burns and long, deep cuts.

The Word became flesh. This kind of flesh. Abused, mistreated flesh. Her flesh. Stupid me, I hadn't made that connection before.

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I don't mean to shock you this morning, or to ruin your Christmas. I mean only to underscore the gravity, the urgency,

the gasping wonder of the Christmas Gospel.

Babies, as a rule, are beautiful little creatures. I notice that every time I get to baptize one. It's easy to marvel at the perfection of tiny little fingers that itch to wrap themselves around a bigger one. "In the beginning was the Word," John writes. The writer to the Hebrews described him just now as "the exact imprint of God's very being." To see that imprint lodged in the form of a baby is not so hard. No wonder the phrase "The Word became flesh" has taken on a sweet and sentimental hue for lots of us. The world at large kind of likes it too.

All babies grow up, of course. Some grow up pretty. More don't. Even the pretty ones start to hanker at some point for the flesh that was, and is no more. The baby-soft skin, for example. People have raked in money by the gazillions peddling lotions that promise to restore that. Later the wrinkles set in as they're bound to do, and more gazillions get handed over to the Botox company and their crew of plastic surgeons to remedy these. More often than not the rest of us will laugh behind our hands at the results.

Fitness centers have sprouted like mushrooms in the last couple of decades. I don't frequent them. I get the impression driving by that they're packed with earnest young adults intent on honing their flesh into the finest form it can possibly assume. I've heard from those who do go inside that much of what you see there is a wee bit on the sad side. All the reps in the world won't get those bodies looking godlike.

Then there are those—too many of those—who never had a chance. From the start, the flesh rebelled. It got too roly-poly. The cute baby face turned plain. In teenage years the acne attacked. The emerging proportions of the adult body were somehow out of kilter. Later psoriasis set in. The heartbreak thereof, as they

continue to call it. Or at some point there were cancer cells.

All this is flesh. Mortal flesh, infected from the start with the seeds of corruption and death. And most of it is ugly, or at least not very pretty. You wouldn't realize that, of course, if all you knew of human flesh was what you saw in American TV shows or movies. The British, I think, are far, far better at telling the truth about this. When they pick actors for their shows they don't do pretty, they do real. Talent matters, looks not so much.

Anyway, the Word became flesh. The exact imprint of God's very being lodged itself in the stuff that really is, not the stuff we'd like it to be. When the Greeks sculpted images of their gods they crafted perfect human forms, all with faces that are very easy to look at. Since 99% of ancient Greeks didn't look that way, the message was plain. You aren't a god, or a child of God. You can't be. Get back to the mines, or galleys, or kitchens where the likes of you belong. Don't waste your time hoping.

Today's Christmas Gospel, first spoken by God, through St. John, to a Greek-speaking world, says quite the opposite. God made himself to look like you. Most all of you. Start hoping now, whoever you are. However you are. Whatever the shape your flesh is in.

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These words are spoken to that woman in the picture too, and anyone else who looks like her. There are all too many of them in our own country, our own city. They stumble day after endless day into the emergency room at Metro General. Or else the ambulances bring them there. Their flesh is damaged and broken. Not so much, I suspect, by fire and knives, as by bullets or needles. You might think that the story I told can't happen



here. We're not savages you say, as if, over there, they are. Truth is, over there they use cell phones too these days, and Facebook, and most all have been baptized or have some kind of long-standing Christian connection. But the darkness of sin hangs heavy on that land, as it does in ours. It addles human wits and even Christian wits. I have yet to hear of a Papua New Guinean attacking an elementary school with an automatic rifle. Pictures of the torn and damaged flesh that showed up recently in Las Vegas hospitals weren't displayed on the internet, or at least I hope they weren't. But if they had been, we'd have seen little difference between them and those photos of the tortured woman. If anything, the damage to bodies in Las Vegas was even worse.

The Word became flesh. Not pretty flesh, but torn and broken flesh. The exact image of God's very being is imprinted on a tortured man whose back and scalp are torn to shreds and who is hanging from nails as he gasps his final breath.

To see the glory of God at its most astonishing, that's where you look. Not in the manger, but at the cross. This is God's grace, that his only Son, the joy of the Father's heart, should be buried in flesh as ugly as the ugliest among us; as torn as the most torn, as broken as the most broken. That Christ should do this to rescue the ugly, to heal the torn, to redeem the broken; to raise the dead.

And this is God's truth this Christmas morning. His heart is set on that woman in the photo and on the millions like her the world over, even in America. The torn and broken flesh that littered the world in 2017, that will do so again in 2018—all of matters profoundly to God. He treasures the people he gave it too. He treasures you, and the flesh you occupy, whatever shape that flesh is in. He asks you to trust that he will care for it; that when it turns to dust or ashes as it must, he will not

allow his dear and treasured ones to be lost in its corruption. He makes a promise that even the greediest, most unscrupulous advertiser wouldn't dare to peddle. He will raise the dead. He will drape his dear ones in new flesh, in bodies that befit their dignity as daughters and sons of God Most High.

All this he will do in honor of the One that you and I are gathered this morning to worship and adore. We call him Jesus, the name God picked. "The Lord saves"—that's what the name means.

The Lord saves us from sin. The Lord saves us from death. The Lord saves us from the evil that others do, and others from the evil that we do to them. The Lord saves the ugly, the withered, the mortally ill. The Lord saves the broken, the torn, the abused, the addicted. The Lord saves the ones that others scorn and forget. The Lord saves that woman in the photo. The Lord saves you.

+ Soli Deo Gloria +

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by Michael Hoy

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## No "Mission" in Luther? A Re-

# examination (Part 3 of 3)

Colleagues,

Below is the final installment of our serial post on Luther and mission, penned 15 years ago by Ed Schroeder. Here Ed moves from reportage to analysis and assessment. He also stirs the pot with some polite though pointed critique of positions and trends that people who passed as he did, from the LCMS to the ELCA via the fleeting AELC, were prone to regard as “sacred cows.” If you share that mini-tradition, you might still find yourself jarred by the pokes Ed takes at them. So be it. They deserve the pokes they get, especially the ones that have since morphed into the closest thing there is to missiological dogma within the ELCA.

Ed’s final comment below is that “this is a work in progress.” This prompts me to report on progress having been made at the Third International Crossings Conference in 2010, where two of the papers dealt at length with crucial concept of God’s “ambidexterity” and its implication for thinking about mission. Jukka Kaariainen, now teaching at the Lutheran seminary in Taipei, wrote one of them. I wrote the other. Both papers were available on the Crossings website until it underwent some updates. I will let you know if and when they appear again.

Speaking of Crossings conferences, yet another reminder that the seventh of them gets underway on Monday morning, January 29. A Sunday evening conversation with Ed will precede it. Presenters will include the newly appointed dean of Trinity Lutheran Seminary, Kit Kleinhans. Valparaiso’s Matthew Becker will be there too. So will David Zahl, executive director of Mockingbird Ministries, a band of fairly young Episcopalians who use Luther’s distinction of Law and Gospel to make sense of the world via a smashing website. Now is the time to register if you haven’t done that yet.

Peace and Joy,

Jerry Burce

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Luther's Theology of Mission (continued)  
by Edward H. Schroeder

### III. Warneck Revisited in View of These Sermons

Some thoughts about Warneck's verdict on the Lutheran reformers: "We miss not only missionary action, but even the idea of missions, in the sense in which we understand them today. And this...because fundamental theological views hindered them from giving their activity, and even their thoughts, a missionary direction."

The Markan text for Luther's Ascension Day sermons put a theological context on the "Go ye" imperative that Warneck doesn't notice, I think. Even though he cites those Ascension Day sermons frequently, in none of them does he find the "duty" for mission to the non-Christian world, "mission thinking in the sense in which we understand it today." That is, organized agencies generated by a mission mentality in people already Christian and factually bringing the Gospel to "unreached peoples."

**Thesis 1: "Mission" for Luther is probably different from "the sense in which we [Warneck] understand it today."**

A. The Gospel itself is the active agent, the subject of the sentence, for the Gospel's ongoing rippling. Granted, people are the Gospel's agents, but the Gospel itself is the main actor, the stone sending out the ripples. The ascended Christ can also be designated the subject of the Gospel's ongoing rippling. His ascension does not remove him from the scene, but transposes his presence as the disciples knew him into new formats. Thus he can be equally close to everyone.

B. With this notion that Christ—and/or the Gospel itself—are in charge of mission history, comes Luther's image of the "Platzregen," the moving thundershower. When people no longer respond in genuine faith to the shower of the Gospel upon their

dry land, Christ and his Gospel move on to other venues. It does not require a mission society decision for the Platzregen to move elsewhere. The Platzregen creates its own agents. The Gospel majors in ad-hocery for mission strategy. The book of Acts abounds in such Platzregen episodes of unplanned mission work.

C. When the Gospel ripples, when the Platzregen shifts to a new turf where it hasn't been before, it does not encounter an "empty land." Though the land is "dry" as far as THE Gospel is concerned, other "gospels" are already there. Even more, thinks Luther, what you can expect to be at the center of these other gospels is "salvation by works of the law."

**Thesis 2: Even "Reached peoples" continue to be mission fields.**

D. Nearly every one of the N.T. epistles (maybe the gospels too)—all within the first few generations of the church's history—speak of "other" gospels that were present inside the Christian communities (not just outside in the world—on Mars Hill). Luther saw 16th century Europe, where everyone was baptized, to be just like that. One of his comments above was his wondering if the Gospel had ever gotten to Germany through the vehicle of the mission of the Latin church.

E. What made 16th-century Europe a mission field? Other gospels were reigning. "Salvation by works" was their common denominator, he thought. If we didn't know it before, we know it now: 21st-century USA is a vast mission field—also and especially within the Christian churches. The "gospel of America" has millions of worshippers in both church and state. And the core of that gospel is salvation by works of the law. Self-righteousness is claimed as real righteousness.

F. Is the continuing focus—despite disclaimers to the contrary—of American Christian mission energy and efforts to "unreached peoples" elsewhere a tacit admission that we cannot reach the unreached people within our borders, often the very people who we ourselves are with our confused faith, our garbled

gospels about God Bless America and the crucified/risen Messiah? Do Jesus' words: "Physician, heal thyself," apply here?

### **Thesis 3: Luther's Theology of the Kingdom of God and Mission Theology**

G. To Warneck's words: "the Reformer does not understand the progress of the Gospel through the whole world in the sense that Christianity would become everywhere the ruling religion, or that all men would be won to believe the Gospel." And again Warneck's words about Luther's "prejudicial bias in eschatology, [and his] defect in the doctrine of the Kingdom of God."

H. Putting these two citations together signals Warneck's theology of the Kingdom of God, namely, "that Christianity would become everywhere the ruling religion." Nowadays we'd call that a repeat of Constantinian Christendom, wouldn't we? I think Warneck is correct in saying that this contradicts Luther's notion of the Kingdom of God. Luther did not see God's kingdom becoming a "ruling religion" at all. That sounds more like Calvin's Geneva than Luther's Wittenberg. Luther's conviction about "God's two kingdoms" ruled out any notion of Faith-in-the-Gospel becoming a "ruling religion." For him that was an oxymoron. Much of his critique of the medieval church and state was directed against that very notion. But that raises the question: is Warneck or Luther closer to the original NT witness about the Kingdom of God itself?

Luther's own theology of the Kingdom of God is simply expressed when he treats the second petition of the Lord's Prayer in his two catechisms. The Kingdom of God is not a territory at all, and surely not one with a "ruling religion," but God's act of reclaiming sinners. "How does God's kingdom come?" he asks in the Small Catechism. Answer: "Whenever our heavenly Father gives us his Holy Spirit, so that through his grace we believe his Holy Word and live godly lives, both here in time and hereafter in eternity." In the Large Catechism he speaks the mission motive in this petition: We pray Thy kingdom come "both in order

that we who have accepted it may remain faithful and grow daily in it and also in order that it may find approval and gain followers among other people and advance with power throughout the world. In this way many, led by the Holy Spirit, may come into the kingdom of grace and become partakers of redemption, so that we may all remain together eternally in this kingdom that has now begun.” (Kolb-Wengert: The Book of Concord. 357 & 447)

#### **IV. Conclusions**

1. Luther’s value for mission today lies less in what he may have said about the Great Commission than in the groundbreaking two-stage hermeneutics he proposed and practiced. Stage One is the law/promise hermeneutics for reading the Bible, and then Stage Two is a left-hand/right-hand hermeneutics for reading the world.

2. The Bible is constantly being read and preached legalistically both at home and abroad. If it was official papist legalism then, it is in so many places populist legalism now. What makes that bad is not just that it is a mistake, but that the merits and benefits of Christ go to waste and consciences do not receive God’s promising comfort from such teaching and preaching. Even if the receivers like what they hear, that is no sufficient test of its gospel-ness. So Christian missionaries today wherever in the world they are, and from whatever sending community, constantly need to be running the “double dipstick” test on preaching and teaching, the same one Melanchthon commends in Apology IV. How might that be implemented? Not easily, for sure. Initially because there are tens of thousands of Christian denominations/groups around the world these days, and secondly, proposals for “reformation-reexamination” do not automatically get welcomed. But something analogous to the Saxon Visitation of parish preaching in the late 1520s might be a model.

3. The hermeneutics of the ambidextrous God for reading the world is sorely needed all over the place.

a. The universalism gaining ground in Christian circles reads the world with a one-handed God on the scene. All encounters with God are grace-encounters. ["Sloppy Agape"] Even Barth (way back in the days when I was doing my dissertation) said: "That God reveals himself to us at all is already grace." God's law, his left-hand work in the world, none of which redeems sinners, is unknown territory.

b. Antinomianism in a variety of formats is prominent. Here I'm not thinking about the realm of ethics, but about the fundamental theology of God's own word and work in the world. That God could be both Gift-Giver Creator AND CRITIC is an oxymoron for many—despite this double action of God so patent in Genesis 1-3.

c. From this notion that God is by definition gracious, the merits and benefits of Christ lose their uniqueness. They are just one more instance of God's "standard operating procedures" known as sola gratia. Even if Christ had never happened, God's grace-operations would continue and that alone would suffice for the world's salvation. Paul's verdict on such theology: "Then Christ died for nothing."

d. Now to link this to missions today and just stay within our own ballpark:

i. The print materials coming from the ELCA's Division of Global Mission not only eschew this Lutheran hermeneutic, they are clearly critical of it. Global Mission 21 is a case in point.

ii. Then there are those dear guys like "our" Jim Mayer: "We do not do mission work to bring God to the poor and the oppressed, rather, through our mission efforts we find God among the poor and the oppressed and seek to walk alongside them in their journey toward liberation." Not clear in Jim's bon mot when he "finds God among the poor and oppressed" is which hand of God he found working among the poor. That's not an academic question. For its answer determines the mission agenda. If both hands were already operative (and not just the one that a Lutheran would

anticipate), then the “walk alongside” is good mission strategy. If, however, God is there only with the left hand, then God’s right-hand Reconciler is not yet there. Then Gospel needs to be inserted because it is not present. To use another phrase from Paul, “God is still counting their trespasses.” To be clear on God already at work in any mission field (USA included) is a prerequisite to the Great Commission.

iii. The LCMS Mission Affirmations, groundbreaking as they were in the 1960s and hailed by many of us then, do not use either of the two stages of Luther’s hermeneutics. See the item on “*missio dei*” below. That term was the new word put into LCMS mission conversation at that time. It has widespread acceptance today across the ecumenical spectrum—from Rome to the Mennonites—but it reads the Bible and the world with different lenses from the ones Luther proposed.

iv. Luther’s hermeneutics addresses additional agendas in missiology today: I’ll mention two.

Gospel and Culture: Luther would ask: What are you missiologists up to with your Gospel and Culture agenda? Granted, culture was not in Luther’s dictionary; it’s a modern discovery. But he does have a place to talk about culture, I suggest, with his theological category of God’s “left hand.” The corollary, of course, is God’s “right hand,” where the Kingdom of God resides. Luther would relegate culture, I’m sure, to God’s left hand—even so-called “Christian cultures.” Any “ruling religion” (Warneck’s cherished phrase)—in any culture, I think, he would also locate in God’s left hand. Whatever ruling the Gospel does, its venue for such ruling is human hearts, not human cultures. God’s left hand “rules” in human cultures. Thus theological analysis of culture follows rubrics written by God’s left hand.

*Missio Dei*, i.e. “the mission of God”: Luther would ask us to get more clarity on this big code word. The ambidextrous God proclaimed in the scriptures, he learned, has two missions going in the world—law and promise. Both of them have divine



authorization, but they can't be blended into one *missio Dei*—except at the one place where God did indeed work simultaneously with both hands. That is the day Christians commemorate and call Good Friday. Grisly though it was, it was eminently good for us. “God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not counting our trespasses against us, but making him, the Christ, to be sin for us so that we might become the righteousness of God in him.”

### **Moving Toward Closure**

I haven't read enough yet in mission history to know if or where Luther's two-stage hermeneutic ever got serious attention among the people doing mission. So far I've found none, but I've barely scratched the surface of the literature—especially in Yale's vast resources.

Two of my colleagues, Bob Schultz and Bob Bertram, have worked this turf in the past. Back in 1971 Bob Bertram did two essays for Bill Danker's mission workshops, and—no surprise—Bob used Lutheran hermeneutics for those essays. “Doing Theology in Relation to Mission” centers on the Biblical hermeneutical point. “A Theologian's Perspective on Economic Activities in the Christian World Mission” works from Luther's hermeneutics of the world. They are now available on the Crossings web site under “Works of Bob Bertram.”

Bob Schultz has called attention to the differing formats in which God's left hand works in different societies. Even though it is all “law,” the paradigms, the perceptions, can vary, especially when it comes to God's criticism. Careful attention to God's format for critique is necessary for finding fitting language for the Good News. If the bad-news experience is shame, then the Good News of Christ is acceptance. If guilt, then forgiveness. If possession, then redemption [literally “regaining ownership”]. If alienation, then atonement. If bondage (e.g., to karma), then freedom. If orphaned (even bastards), then adoption as God's kids, and so on. Here's one

Schultz quote: “When I think about Japan, I think of the novels of Endo f. I read Silence as a description of the successful Japanese resistance to the conversion to a guilt culture by using guilt to destroy the [Jesuit] missionary. What might have happened if that mission had primarily addressed issues of shame?”

Summa. As you can see, this is a work in progress.

Edward H. Schroeder

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## No “Mission” in Luther? A Re-examination (Part 2 of 3)

Colleagues,

Here is the next installment of Ed Schroeder’s exploration of Luther’s thinking on the topic of mission.

Peace and Joy,

Jerry Burce

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### **Luther’s Theology of Mission** (*continued*)

by Edward H. Schroeder

#### **C. The Sermon from 1536**

##### *The Mission Mandate*

Here Luther is struck by the overwhelming magnitude of the mission mandate. “These are words of impressive majesty, pure

majesty. Jesus commands these poor beggars to go and proclaim this new message—not in one city or nation, but to the whole world, every principality and kingdom. They are to open their mouths with confidence, with no inhibitions, to the whole creation, so that every human hears this message. A command so powerful, so overwhelming, has never been given in the world before.” The Lord gives “his eleven beggars” a command of such dimensions “that they are not to flinch or cower before anyone, no matter how high and mighty he be, but openly move on and on as far as the world extends, and proclaim as though everyone would have to listen and no one would be able to resist them.” Only with the Lord’s own strength is it possible to “move from Jerusalem to the ends of the world telling everyone about this King Christ.” “For he does not want his message stuck in a corner nor anyone to be ashamed of it or have it be secluded or under cover. He himself made it so public that the sun in heaven, yes even trees and stones, would wish to hear it—if only they had ears to do so.”

### *The Great Commission*

Here is what Christ is telling his apostles: “Wherever you go into the world and preach, you shall not say that the people must come to Jerusalem nor hold fast to Moses’ law. But this you shall say; if they desire to be saved, they should believe your preaching about me and be baptized in my name. Begin such preaching among my own people, who seek to be saved by their law and sacrifice, and then move out through the whole Roman Empire and all corners of the world, to those who hold to other gods. Reprove and condemn it in one heap, and tell them: this is the command that I, the Lord of Heaven and Earth, give—that they believe in me. That is my sermon, intended to go throughout the world, unhindered, unprotected, regardless whether the Jews do not believe it . . . or the Gentiles seek to suppress it by force.”

To this exposition of the mission mandate Luther adds some practical counsel for his hearers and for his time: "For us here this is a comforting sermon. For in these words of Christ we are included. He says: Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation. 'All the world' includes us, wherever we are and how many or how few we may be. The world is where people are. Thus the Gospel must be on the run, continually on the run. Even though it may not remain [if it bears no fruit] at some places, it must come to every place and be heard everywhere. And just as this is a universal command to have the Gospel reach all humankind, so it also is a universal command and mandate from God, that all should believe this word."

Warneck noticed that in these sermons Luther never mentions anything like a mission society, never urges organizing to get the job done. No project-proposal, no project-management. One reason for that is his conviction that not just the mandate, but its execution is the activity of the living Lord Christ. Sometimes Luther speaks of the Gospel itself as a personified entity pursuing its own agenda, as with the ripples in the pond. The ripples are the Gospel, itself on the move, initially with no apparent concern that human agents carry it out to the edge of the pond. Consequently the continuation of Luther's thoughts about the course of the Gospel through the inhabited world and the public proclamation of the saving message to all humankind now funnel into his testimony about the church as Christ's body in the world, even the church as the Gospel's body in the world. Yet even here there is no mention of organizing for mission, the main point of Warneck's complaint—"missions, in the sense in which we understand them today."

*The Church of God Throughout the World—Christ and His Gospel in Charge*

Luther says: "No longer need we go to Jerusalem or some other specific place, as God commanded for his ancient people. Rather God has now designated another place and built a church, whose walls encircle the entire world. St. Paul says that the Gospel has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven (Col.1:23). Its blueprint extends to all nations and its message to the ends of the world. That indicates a church as wide as heaven and earth are. When Christ gives the mission command (Mark 16:15) he is saying: 'By the preaching of the Gospel I want to build a church as wide and as large as the world itself is, where I wish to live and speak.' For wherever in the world his word or his preaching office goes, there Christ lives, there he makes himself known and speaks with all of us." Even so Luther sounds a sober note. He knows well that hand in hand with the expansion of the church throughout the world goes opposition, to which the church is constantly exposed. "The church is destined to go to the ends of the world, even though in the world she will suffer persecution."

### *Baptism*

The correlation of Gospel-preaching and baptism in Christ's mission mandate is, in Luther's 1536 sermon, evidence that Christ the Lord intends to expand and preserve his church in this world. For with baptism the faith created by the Gospel becomes confession, a testimony that binds Christians to each other and moves them to be witnesses to others. Christ's command "Teach the nations and baptize them" (Matt. 28:19) signals that "the faith which the Gospel creates must not remain hidden or kept secret as though it were sufficient for anyone to hear the Gospel and believe it for himself, without wanting to move out and confess that faith before others." Luther sees baptism as "going public" with one's faith.

"Rather so that it become publicly evident where the Gospel is

not only preached, but also accepted and believed, i.e., where the church and Christ's kingdom stands in the world, Christ wants to unite us and preserve us through the divine sign of baptism. For if baptism were not present we would be isolated without external assembling and signs, Christianity would never expand nor survive till the world's end. Yet Christ wants to unite us via such divine gatherings so that the Gospel move on further and further and by our confessing it be brought to others. Thus baptism is a public testimony to the doctrine of the Gospel and to our faith before the whole world. Thereby all can see where and among whom this Lord reigns."

In this connection Luther also emphasizes that the true unity of Christians throughout the world is evident in the simplicity of these means of grace—the one proclamation of the risen Christ, the one baptism—which are universally the same in contrast to the "wide multiplicity of countries and peoples, nations and languages" where they occur. The venue for Christ's kingdom is manifold and multiplex, "all the world and to all creatures," but the baptismal core is "everywhere one and the same." The same is true of the proclaimed Gospel "one and the same here and in all places." It renders all of us "equal before God." "Should someone come from the end of the world and observe how we do these things, he would have to say that what he sees among us is one and the same word and sign that he had learned and received." The church is a "people gathered from all tongues of the world" into the unity of faith.

## **II. OK, That's Luther's "Mission" Preaching. Now, What Does This Mean?**

When presenting this report on Luther's sermons at the Overseas Ministries Study Center in March of 2002 I got three questions from the audience:

1. There's still no admonition from Luther to the Wittenbergers about their *duty to be missionaries*, and thus no mention of anything like a mission society to carry out the great commission. Why?
2. First a statement: For the Gospel to connect to people's lives there must be some *anticipations of the Gospel* present in the culture of those people for the Gospel to connect to. Question: What "anticipations" did Luther expect to find in not-yet evangelized people?
3. Luther's monumental translation of the Bible "incarnated" the Word of God into German language and culture. What substantive role does "*incarnation*" play when he's articulating his mission theology?

Some possible answers:

### **To #1. Duty to be missionaries**

The mission society notion was unknown to everyone in the 16th century. In its place Luther, as indicated above, viewed the church itself as "body of Christ" to be the "mission agency" for the ongoing ripple effect of the Gospel. If he makes no concrete proposals about the "how to" for the church's continuing Gospelling, I suspect it was because his trust in the Gospel convinced him that the ripples and Platzregen would take place by God's own engineering and timetable. It's also possible that he was myopic and "just didn't see it." Nevertheless there were a number of consciously organized Lutheran ventures in the decades right after Luther's death. If the impetus for these didn't come from him—maybe from his "much too exclusive focus on justification"—where did it come from?

[Werner Elert's chapter on "Missions" in his *Structure of Lutheranism [Morphologie des Luthertums]* grounds these early mission starts right after Luther's death in his mission theology. Perhaps even more fascinating is Elert's 2-page

footnote on the world mission survey—*Commentarii de regno Christi*—of Philip Nicolai (yes, the composer/hymnwriter of “Wake, Awake. . .” and “How Lovely Shines the Morning Star”) published in 1597. Nicolai chronicles all the places in the post-Columbus world where he knows (from documentation) that the Gospel has now arrived. And they cover the world. He even includes 13 Jesuit mission stations in Far East Asia. The Jesuits!? Why them? Because “to gain entrance there, the Jesuits proclaim the Christian religion as it is taught at home by the Lutherans.... To begin with, they are silent about the papacy, human traditions, the Mass, purgatory, merits and indulgences. Instead they proclaim the doctrine of the fall of mankind,...of redemption through Christ, of faith, and of Baptism.” To support this claim about “Lutheran” Jesuits Nicolai cites a Jesuit report sent from Japan in 1564.]

If Luther were asked why he didn’t urge his parishioners in these sermons to be missionaries, my hunch is that he’d say: “I did, but the mission turf I urged upon them was not foreign fields. Instead it was their own backyards, their manifold callings in secular society, into which God sent them every time they awoke in the morning. Their mission was to be God’s agents for the “care and redemption of all that you [God] had made.”

## **To #2: Anticipations**

I’ve got no Luther quotes at hand, but I can guess what he would (ought to!) say. His law/promise hermeneutic for reading the scriptures, and its corollary left hand/right hand works of God for reading the world, would look for law/left hand work of God among every people before the Gospel gets there. In fact, 24/7 (as folks now say) data. Every day full of such God data. This would be his own anticipation of everyone’s God-experience prior to encountering/hearing the Gospel. You don’t need any proclaimer to bring this experience to people. It’s the godly



fabric of daily life in the “old” creation. If the preacher has any role in this, it is not bringing God’s law/left hand into the scene. Rather it is helping people see God already operating that way in their midst. Paul seeks to show the Gentiles in the opening chapters of Romans that God is already on the scene in their daily lives, that they have the law functioning in their psycho-social fabric, and that repentance is the response called forth from these facts of life.

To label it “law” or “left-hand” in no way makes it all bad news. Not by a long shot. This 24/7 lived experience encompasses the gift of our own existence along with the panoply of ongoing goodies we receive to keep that existence going—physical, social, political, etc. Luther laundry-lists these, e.g., in his two catechisms when he talks about “daily bread” in the 4th petition of the Lord’s Prayer. Or again all the gifts he lists when commenting on the first article of the Apostles Creed in his catechisms. All these elements of creaturely daily life and experience he calls “*larvae dei*,” masks of God. Really God-encounters, but God wearing a mask, so that it’s not obvious to everybody—maybe even not obvious to anybody—where the goodies come from—and even more important, what the appropriate response is for such beneficence. At the end of the First Article treatment in the catechisms he then comes in, you guessed it, with a “but.” “But for all of these gifts I am already in arrears in my obligations to thank and to praise, to serve and obey him. This is most certainly true.”

You may call these “anticipations” of the Gospel, if you wish, but they are anticipations with a twist. The main “twist” is that all these gifts from God in 24/7 daily life experiences are gifts that obligate. Au contraire the Gospel. It is a gift that liberates from the accumulated unfulfilled obligations accruing in our God-encounters of the first-creation kind. The Gospel, by definition, does not impose new obligations. Even as you move

from Gospel indicatives to Gospel imperatives, there is no obligation, not even subtle coercion anywhere along the line. For freedom Christ has set us free. Another ML text where I do know this surfaces is in his preface to Romans that accompanies his translation of the NT (1522). There he makes a big point—actually says St. Paul makes a big point—in distinguishing between God's gifts and God's grace. The distinction is focused as I've done above. For example., in Romans Paul claims that the Gentiles have had such God- gift encounters "ever since the creation of the world." Then comes his "but." "But they did not honor the giver as God or give thanks to him." Even worse, they did not repent. "So they are without excuse."

Now that could be a sort of anticipation of the Gospel—in the sense of a palpable need for a "grace-encounter" that would rectify the deficits arising from these "gift-encounters." If I remember correctly your own story [I was responding to Lamin Sanneh] in the OMSC journal some years ago, as you narrated your journey to the Christian gospel from Islam, you said something like this. Maybe not "rectifying deficits"—I don't remember it exactly—but something like this I recall: your growing awareness, perhaps even longing, for a grace-encounter (a "more" grace-full encounter?) with God that The Prophet had not supplied, but that the Suffering Servant palpably offered.

### **To #3: Incarnations**

Luther's sermons on the Johannine prologue, his Christmas homilies, etc. are replete with the theology of incarnation. But I don't know if he would have called his image of the Gospel's ripple-effect "new incarnations" of the Gospel in previously unreached cultures. I'd also wonder if he saw his German Bible translation as an incarnation. My hunch is that he would hang his translation of the Bible on a lower peg. If two ancient languages, Hebrew and Greek, could be vehicles for the Word of

God, any language could be. Incarnation, I'd expect him to say, is always soteriological. "For us and for our salvation" the Logos became incarnate, says Nicaea. And no one gets saved just because the Bible is now in German. True, the Word of God is taking on human linguistic form, but that's not yet the heart of incarnation. The "big jump" in Christ's incarnation was not that divinity assumed creaturely form. God in creaturely formats is constantly happening already in the "old" creation via the "masks of God." What's new in the incarnate Logos is not that God takes off the mask and we see God face-to-face, but that in Jesus God is turning a face of mercy to sinners that they could never have divined from their earlier masked encounters.

So what Luther regularly does when exegeting the "Word becoming flesh" is to remind his hearers that the human flesh Christ assumed is mortal flesh. Not that the Logos literally became sinner, but in "assuming" sinners' sort of flesh, the Logos also assumed an eventual death sentence. No surprise, the "full of grace and truth" that accompanies this incarnation gets contrasted three verses later in St. John's prologue with what came in Moses. And you can count on Luther to ring the changes on this distinction, as he thinks John himself does in the frequent Moses-mentionings that Jesus makes throughout the Johannine gospel. Not that Moses was a bad guy. Au contraire. "But" (e.g., in John 6) even though the manna Moses brought (a.k.a. Sinaitic bread) was indeed from God (gift!), it was not good enough to meet the "grace" need Israel had. "Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died." (48) Ergo, needed is better bread, the One that is baked from God's grace and truth.

Equally dear to him is the Christ hymn in Phil. 2 with its classic linking of Bethlehem to Calvary. Christ's incarnation is not just assuming a "human likeness," but taking on our human "schemata," i.e., the form of a slave, destined for death, in

his case “death on a cross.”

*To be continued...*

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## No “Mission” in Luther? A Re-examination (Part 1 of 3)

Colleagues,

Advent is upon us, thrusting the world into a fresh year in the unfolding regime of the crucified and risen Son of God—another *Annus Domini*, as stubborn Christ-folk will continue to put it. In my own [idiosyncratic take on the season](#), Advent is first and foremost a time for baptized travelers to pull off at the scenic overlook, get out of the car, and spend a while drinking in the view. On the far horizon are the shadowy peaks of our ultimate destination. God will use Isaiah in particular to sketch these out for us during our next few weeks at church. Immediately below, and stretching into the distance, is the great jumble of country between here and there, some of it pleasant, some not so much. Death traps abound. Somewhere out there is the one that I’ll be falling into. “So what?” says Christ. “Take a fresh grip on that cross of yours. Fall in line. And on the way down the hill, hit the gas in the fearless confidence that with me in front you will reach those far off heights where babies play with snakes, lambs gambol with wolves, tables groan with the weight of the feast, and the Father waits with arms wide open to welcome his children home.”

Thus Advent, or so I think. And in so thinking I’m inclined as a preacher to spend at least some of the season talking “mission,”

pointing eyes to that messy, broken terrain at the bottom of the hill. That's where we live. It's where God dispatches his saints, week upon week, from the hillocks of their Sunday liturgies, Christ in front, the Holy Spirit behind to push them into the work and witness that awaits them there. The proper name for this terrain is "mission field." The question, as ever, is what to say about it. In the wider Christian world, rumor has it that serious Lutherans are ill-equipped to say much about mission at all. As Ed Schroeder will point out in today's chief offering, Luther is thought to have been "mission-deficient." Ed, of course, will dispute that. In doing so he'll dredge up a welter of ideas that the rest of us can put to use as we think, pray, listen, and proclaim between now and Christmas.

This will be the third opus in a row that I send your way with Ed as either author or translator. Like the prior two, it comes to you in segments, the theory being that 2000 or so words are enough for one sitting. Much more, and eyes start glazing. Or so one suspects in this era of information overload.

The genesis of this piece was a semester-long stint that Ed spent as scholar-in-residence at [OMSC](#)—the Overseas Ministries Study Center—in New Haven, Connecticut. The year was 2002. Some months later he presented his research to a little group of like-minded thinkers that Bob Bertram had pulled together around the theme of "Setting the Agenda for Lutheran Theology." That's what you're reading here.

Mission, Ed argues, is high on that Lutheran agenda. I hasten to add that you'll hear much more along those lines at the forthcoming [Crossings conference](#), in Belleville, Illinois, at the end of next month. Our focus is the mission field of 2018 that God will send us into as sturdy bearers of the Gospel, and nothing less than Gospel. You haven't signed up yet? I pray you do!

Peace and Joy,  
Jerry Burce

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## **Luther's Theology of Mission**

by Edward H. Schroeder

### **Introduction.**

#### **Are Missions Missing in Luther's Theology? The Accepted Wisdom in Missiology Says Yes.**

Lutheran churches did not move actively into "foreign" mission work in the wake of the Reformation era nor in the next two centuries that followed. This delay has nourished the widespread opinion that in Luther—and other 16th-century Lutheran reformers (and John Calvin too)—"we miss not only missionary action, but even the idea of missions, in the sense in which we understand them today. And this...because fundamental theological views hindered them from giving their activity, and even their thoughts, a missionary direction." So says Gustav Warneck in his *History of Protestant Missions*, 1882ff. [Citation from the 1901 English translation, p.9]

Warneck's work was itself a critical response to other Lutheran mission scholars of his day (Ostertag, Plitt, Kalkar) who claimed the opposite for Luther. But, as far as I know, Warneck's work was the only one that got translated into English. And English is the language of missiology. So his judgment has become the accepted wisdom of the trade.

Many reasons have been adduced to explain this:

- The massive task of organizing church life throughout large areas of Europe where the Reformation took hold demanded all the time and energy they had.
- Very few of the Lutheran territories had direct access to international waters and thus did not acquire overseas colonies to raise the mission issue.
- By contrast, Spain and Portugal ("Roman Catholic" nations) became worldwide colonial powers, opening the doors to Roman Catholic mission activity and mission theology.

Also internal factors get mentioned:

- Luther expected Judgment Day to arrive soon, perhaps still in his lifetime, and was convinced that the Gospel already had come to all nations, so no mission operations were needed.
- It was also said that early Lutheranism understood Christ's mission mandate (Matt. 28 and Mark 16) to apply only to the apostles, not to the entire church, and consequently no one should engage in evangelization without explicit call and authorization.

Warneck's critique goes deeper:

"The great reformer did not see the mission task of the church. Luther did require and encourage the 'spirit of witnessing,' but not really the 'spirit of mission.' Within Christendom he himself missionized with 'demonstrations of the Spirit and of power,' but mission to the non-Christian world was far from his mind and from that of his coworkers."

Why this defect? "The missing impulse for mission comes largely from an error in Lutheran theology, namely, (1) a biased notion of eschatology, [and] (2) a defect in the doctrine of the Kingdom of God. These flaws are understandable (and excusable) partly from Luther's personality, partly from the conflicts

going on at the time, partly from the justifiable polemics about justification which nevertheless led to *a much too exclusive focus on that doctrine.*" [13f., emphasis added.]

After noting that Luther thought the mission mandate already fulfilled, Warneck says: "This startling view becomes in some degree intelligible when we further learn that the Reformer does not understand the progress of the Gospel through the whole world in the sense that Christianity would become everywhere the *ruling religion*, or that all men would be won to believe the Gospel." [1906 English translation, p. 13, emphasis added.]

Those are hefty criticisms.

+ + +

## **Revisiting the Accepted Wisdom: Exploring Luther for Mission Themes**

Luther himself could well have missed the mission message in the scriptures. But if he was indeed the trustworthy witness to the Gospel, as the later Lutheran confessions call him, is it likely that he could be right about the evangel, and yet miss the element of evangelization intrinsic to it? Given Luther's intense wrestling with the theology of St. Paul, the "apostle to the Gentiles," how could he have missed the missiology in Paul's theology? If he did talk about the Great Commission, and he did, what did he say?

### **1. Luther's Preaching on the Great Commission Text of Mark's Gospel**

One place to look for "Luther on Mission" is the sermons Luther preached year after year on the Feast of the Ascension. Why those sermons? The text for that festival—year after year in the medieval church's lectionary—was Mark 16:14-20, the Great Commission pericope in Mark's Gospel. It reads:



Later he appeared to the eleven themselves as they were sitting at the table; and he upbraided them for their lack of faith and stubbornness, because they had not believed those who saw him after he had risen. And he said to them, "Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation. The one who believes and is baptized will be saved; but the one who does not believe will be condemned. And these signs will accompany those who believe: by using my name they will cast out demons; they will speak in new tongues; they will pick up snakes in their hands, and if they drink any deadly thing, it will not hurt them; they will lay their hands on the sick, and they will recover." So then the Lord Jesus, after he had spoken to them, was taken up into heaven and sat down at the right hand of God. And they went out and proclaimed the good news everywhere, while the Lord worked with them and confirmed the message by the signs that accompanied it.

Luther's sermons on this text—I found twelve (from 1522 to 1538) in the Weimar edition of Luther's Works—contain mission theology aplenty. Warneck knew these sermons too. He cites them often. But they didn't satisfy him for the reasons mentioned above. We shall look at three of them here. This Markan Ascension Day text provides a context for Christ's "GO" word that Matthew 28 does not have. Luther makes heavy use of that context, viz.,

- the disciples' initial lack of faith, "not believing those who saw him after he had risen,"
- Christ's faith-codicil to the commission "who believes and is baptized will be saved,"
- the ascended Lord as the mission commissioner, and finally
- the baptism addendum and the addendum about signs and wonders.

## **1. The Ascension Day Sermon of 1522**

In the 1522 sermon he says: "What should they proclaim? Nothing less, says Christ, than that I am raised from the dead, have conquered and wiped away sin and all misery. Whoever believes this is saved (*selig*). That faith alone suffices for salvation... Faith does not coerce or pressure anyone to the gospel, rather it invites and encourages everyone freely. Whoever believes, believes. Whoever comes to it, comes. Whoever stays away, stays away."

How shall we understand the words: Go into all the world? What concerns Luther is the fact that the "apostles did not get to the whole world. For no apostle ever got to us in Germany." In view of what he knows about the recently-discovered New World [Note: Luther was nine years old in 1492], he says: "many islands have been discovered in our own time, where unbelievers live and no one has ever preached to them." Doesn't that contradict the scriptural word that Luther knows from Romans 10:18, where Paul (citing Psalm 19:5) testifies "Their voice has gone out to all the earth, and their words to the end of the world"? How to reconcile this with the plain fact that there are vast places where neither the holy apostles nor anyone up to Luther's time has ever proclaimed the gospel? Luther answers: "The message has gone out into all the world, although it has not yet arrived in all the world. The transmission has begun, but is not yet finished. It will be preached wider and further until the Last Day. When this message is proclaimed and heard throughout all the world, then the last day will arrive."

Luther sees three facts: 1) The Holy Apostles began the proclamation in response to Christ's mandate to bring this message to all peoples. 2) The movement of the Gospel throughout the world is not at all concluded, but persists and moves forward. 3) The Gospel's continuing movement is linked to the day of Christ's return. Luther illustrates this "mission theology" with the image of a stone tossed into a pond.

“The message of the Gospel is like a stone cast into water. It makes waves and the waves push outward relentlessly, one pushing the other, until they come to the shoreline. Even when the middle calms down, the waves do not stop, but go on and on. That illustrates Gospel proclamation. The apostles started it and it continues in ever widening circles through other proclaimers. Hounded and persecuted though it may be, it moves on to those who have not heard it before, even when in the process it is crushed and condemned as heresy.”

Luther then offers another illustration. Even worldly rulers send proclamations throughout their entire territory, but it takes time before the messengers get that proclamation to all parts of the realm. “This is how we should understand apostolic preaching,” he says. Such preaching is a public event, not done “in a corner.” “Universal and public throughout the whole world, not to be kept away from anyone, till the end of the world comes.” “Thus the gospel has now come to us as well, us here at the end of the world, at the edge of that pond.” Here Luther shows that he sees himself and his fellow Germans, now enlivened by the revived Gospel, as part of the expanding waves of that original stone cast into the pond and now rippling through the world and hastening toward the Last Day.

Some additional context items in the 1522 sermon:

### ***The factor of faith***

The Ascension text begins with Christ upbraiding the disciples for their un-faith in his resurrection. Not that they needed one more item to believe in and thus be full-believers. But faith in the resurrection is fundamental to being out from under the power / curse of sin. Un-faith is the greatest sin there is. *[Der Unglaube ist die größte Sünd, die da mag genannt werden.]*

(134) Not that the disciples had no faith in God, but without faith in the resurrection they were still in their sin. And if Christ be not raised, then sin is still in charge and any believer is still in sin.

But faith here is not believing THAT it happened—the wicked, Satan too, believe that. (137) “Rather they must believe the content of the resurrection, the fruit, the benefit of the resurrection. Namely, what we have received from it, forgiveness and redemption from all sins, and that Christ has gone into death and thereby sin and death, yes everything that could harm us, is gone. All this he has conquered, trampled under foot, conquering sin, devil, death, hell and whatever could harm us, and therefore he sits at the right hand of the Father. That all of this happened for our benefit, that is what unbelievers don’t believe.” (138)

To the passage: The one who believes is saved, he says: The “head” [*Haupt*] of righteousness is faith, as the head of wickedness is un-faith. There is no greater sin that might condemn [*verdammen*] a person than that. For un-faith alone is what condemns every one who is condemned. As corollary, it is only faith that saves all humankind, for faith deals only with God. (141)

Believe and be baptized, yes, but only un-faith condemns. Baptism is the seal on the letter. Faith in the resurrection and thus freedom from sin, etc. is the writing on the letter. Baptism without faith is a seal on a letter that has no writing in / on it. (142)

### ***Preaching the Gospel to the whole creation***□

“The rocks and trees too? Here’s what those words mean: the Gospel is a universal public announcement that is meant for everyone, is not done in a corner, but should be proclaimed

openly in every place.... It arose and had its start through the apostles, but is not yet complete, has not yet come to all the places it is meant to come. In fact, I wonder whether Germany ever heard God's word before. We have indeed heard the pope's word. That is true." (143f)

### ***Signs and Wonders***□

Mark's gospel concludes with Christ's word about the signs that will accompany the proclamation of the Gospel. Since the Gospel is now widespread, signs are not necessary as they once were in the early days. But the time may come when they are in order again. That will be a signal of the dire state of the Gospel then and ML hopes it won't come. Some people are driving out demons and Luther says, "I don't know what to say about that." [*weiß ich nit was ich dartzu sagen sol.*] This he knows, however, "that it is dangerous. For the devil may allow exorcisms, but he can be deceptive even then. He may be confirming people in their error that they have power over him. I wouldn't trust him. We have many examples of this these days. I know about a number of them that happened not long ago." (146) And then he concludes with an incident where a "church warden" seeking to practice exorcism wound up with the devil breaking his neck.

#### **1. The Ascension Day Sermon of 1523**

##### ***The message must be spoken out loud!***

Luther again preaches on the lectionary text. This time he accentuates the Gospel's quality as something not written in books, but an oral announcement from public messengers sent by God: "A palpable proclamation to be heard throughout the world to be shouted out before all creatures, so that all who have ears would have to hear it." He also emphasizes its public character, "preached in such a way that it could not be more public for everyone to hear." He contrasts it with the ancient

law and what the prophets preached, “restricted only to the Jews in their synagogues. The Gospel however is not to be restricted at all, but moves out unfettered throughout the world, so that no corner of the earth shall not have heard it before the Last Day. That is God’s decree, his decision, that those who cannot read, nor have heard Moses and the prophets, are still to hear the Gospel.”

### ***The earthly activity of the ascended Lord***

The Gospel’s ongoing ripple-effect, says Luther, is the work of Christ now exalted to the right hand of the Father. Christ’s ascension does not mean that he has moved away. Rather just the opposite: now he is present and accessible in all places. “For had he remained on earth...all people could not have been equally near him and able to hear him. Therefore he initiates a new way whereby he can work with everyone, reign in all, proclaim to all, and all of us can hear him and he be with all of us.”

*To be continued...*

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## **Reflections on Luther the Person, Part 2**

Colleagues,

Here is the second half of Rudolf Keller’s essay on Luther the human being, a sinner who trusted Christ. One of you wrote over the weekend to say that Part One was “the best thing I’ve read in the avalanche of materials on the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary.” I trust the rest of it will be just as satisfying. A reminder that the

endnotes apply to last week's post as well as this one. Again our thanks to Ed and Marie Schroeder for both the translation and transmission of Dr. Keller's work.

To each and all, a Happy Thanksgiving!

Peace and Joy,

Jerry Burce

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## **Luther "Personally" as the Reformation Unfolds: Insights Into His Life and Thought** (Second of Two Parts)

By Professor Rudolf Keller

Reichenberg, Germany

September 24, 2017

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Nine years later (1530) came another Imperial Diet, this time in Augsburg where Emperor Charles V wanted to settle the religious conflict. Elector John of Saxony, now Luther's protecting prince, would gladly have taken Luther with him to Augsburg. But that was not possible. Too dangerous. But John wanted Luther to be close at hand. He asked the Town Council of Nuremberg, now an "evangelical" city, whether Luther might reside there during the imperial diet. The Nurembergers, fearing the emperor, said no.

Luther was compelled to know that his life was still in great danger. At the Elector's wish Luther accompanied the group going to Augsburg as far as the southern-most fortress in Saxony, Veste Coburg, and remained there for six months (April to October). In Augsburg it would be others, under the leadership of Philip Melanchthon, who must advise the Elector and complete

the work of formulating the evangelical Augsburg Confession.

From Coburg castle Luther kept close touch with what was going on in Augsburg with frequent letters and many visitors bringing the news. He told his colleagues back in Wittenberg about his stay at the Coburg. He would gladly have been present in Augsburg; life in Coburg was rather boring. Yet he described his situation with humor and confidence:

“There are some bushes right below my window, almost a small forest, where grackles and crows are holding their own imperial diet. There is such a coming and going, such noise day and night without end, as though they all were drunk, totally plastered. I would like to know whether such nobility and important issues are also present where you are. Seems to me they’ve gathered here from all over the world.

“I have not yet seen their emperor, but otherwise these high and mighty noblemen constantly soar through the air babbling before my eyes. They wear no fancy clothes, are all of one color, the same black, and all with the same gray eyes. They all sing the same song, though there is a pleasant difference between the young and the old, the big ones and the small ones. They are not concerned about having a huge palace or hall, for their hall is the great arch of the beautiful wide heavens. Their floor is merely the field outfitted with lovely green branches, and the walls extend to the end of the world. They do not ask for horses and armor, but have their own feathered wheels with which they can escape the bushes and do combat. They are powerful lords. However, I can not yet tell what decisions they are making. What I have heard from an interpreter tells me that they are planning to march out and do battle against wheat, barley (the raw as well as the malted), oats and every sort of grain. Many here will become knights and do great deeds.



“So we too sit here at an imperial diet. We hear and see with great joy and delight how the princes and lords together with the other estates of the empire sing with gladness, enjoying the good life. But we have special pleasure when we see how nobly they strut, wipe their beaks, and present their weapons for victory and honor over grain and malt. We wish them well, namely, that all of them would wind up skewered on a fence post.

“I expect, however, that in Augsburg it’s not much different with the scholars and Papists with their sermons and writings. I must have them all before me in one heap, so that I hear their lovely voices and sermons and see how useful they are, consuming everything on earth, audaciously preening themselves all the time.

“Today for the first time I heard a nightingale, one who had not wanted to trust the April weather. Till now it’s been marvelous weather here, no rain except yesterday a little bit ...”[ref]WA.B 5, S. 294, 7-44.[/ref]

This colorful and enigmatic language reveals that Luther here in his desert could still use humor—or is it gallows humor?—to cope with his unhappy situation. His personal view of the imperial diet shines through his description. He’s specifically skeptical about the church leaders there. They remind him of jackdaws or grackles.

At this time Veit Dietrich, later pastor at St. Sebaldus church in Nuremberg, was his assistant and colleague. Now and then Dietrich sent letters to Melanchthon at Augsburg. In one of these he offered a glimpse of Luther’s faith-life in Coburg. He spoke of Luther’s “cheerful faith” and described Luther at prayer. “Dear Master Philip, You don’t know how concerned I am about your health. I ask you however, in Christ’s name, to take Doctor Luther’s letter to you seriously. I simply marvel at his

incredible confidence, cheerfulness, faith and hope in these terrible times. Yet he nourishes himself constantly doing hard work with God's word. Never a day passes in which he does not spend at least three hours—hours that are actually the best for doing study—hours he instead devotes to prayer.

“I once had the good fortune to overhear him at prayer. Good Lord, what a spirit, what a faith is in his words. With such reverence he prays, addressing God with such hope and faith in the way that one would speak with his own father. ‘I know,’ he says, ‘that you are our God and father. So I am confident that you will eradicate the tormentors of your children. Were you not to do so, then you are in danger just as we are. The whole business is your business; you have pushed us into it. Therefore you, dear father, may take care of it. Etc.’”

“As I heard his words of prayer from a distance, coming with a clear voice, my own heart within me burned for joy. He is so intimate, so intense, so respectful with God as he speaks. In prayer he presses the promises of the Psalms so hard as though confident that everything he is seeking simply must happen. So I doubt not that his prayers will have great consequences for this otherwise ‘lost cause’ at the imperial diet.” [ref]*Ich zitiere eine Übersetzung des lateinischen Briefs* [I cite a translation from the Latin Letter] (WA.B 5, S. 420f) nach CR [as it appears in Corpus Reformatorum] 2, Sp. 159, *hier nach* [translation here by] Friedrich Wilhelm Hopf (Hg.): Martin Luther, *Briefe von der Veste Coburg* [Letters from Veste Coburg], München 1967, S. 7f.[/ref]

Dietrich also wrote to Luther's wife, who was very concerned when the news came that Luther's father had died in Mansfeld. His friend from his school days in Mansfeld, Hans Reinicke, had notified him on June 5 that his father Hans Luther had died in Mansfeld on May 29, 1530. That made him the oldest member of the

family. Luther told this to Melanchthon.[ref]WA.B 5, S. 350f. *Veit Dietrich berichtet Frau Käthe über die Art, wie Luther diese Todesnachricht aufgenommen hat* [Veit Dietrich reports to Mrs. Katie how Luther received this death notice (of his father), WA.B 5, S. 79.[/ref] No way could he make the long trip to Mansfeld for the funeral. What did Dietrich tell Katie about Luther's reaction? "Dear Mrs. Doctor! I ask you not to despair about Herr Doctor. Praise God, he is well and healthy. He didn't think about his father the first two days, although his father's death was a heavy burden for him. When he read Hans Reinicke's letter, he said to me, "Well then, my father too is dead." And immediately thereafter he took his Psalter, went into his room and cried, cried so much that the next morning you could still see it on his face. Since then he has not shown any more signals of grief."

How existential for him was the news of his father's death is no surprise, but he cried a great deal and comforted himself with the Psalms, the prayerbook of the Bible, where lament and praise appear in exemplary format so that he would and could find himself present there.

Frequently scholars claim that Luther had a bad relationship with his father, and that this was a major factor in shaping his personality. When I reflect on the words above, how he cried at his father's death, I conclude that we must be very cautious in making such psychologizing judgments about him.

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In getting a picture of "Luther personal" I want to look at the "personal" element in the hymns he wrote. Frequently in his hymn texts he describes salvation. As though he were an eye-witness of the original Christmas event, his hymn "O Jesus Christ, All Praise to Thee" describes what, what all, is praiseworthy about

Christmas. The personal element comes at the end.

“For us His love these wonders wrought,  
Love surpassing all our thought.  
Then let us all unite and raise  
Our song of glad unending praise.”

His hymn “Dear Christians, One and All Rejoice” becomes personal in a surprising way. Here we hear of God’s Son:

“He spoke to me: Hold fast to Me,  
I am thy rock and castle;  
I wholly give myself to thee,  
For thee I strive and wrestle;  
For I am thine, and thou art Mine,  
Henceforth My place is also thine;  
The foe shall never part us.”

There we see the firm hold on Jesus Christ, who presents himself as the true vine with whom and from whom the branches grow.

Also in the hymn “A Mighty Fortress is our God” Luther’s deepest convictions surface clearly:

“With might of ours can naught be done,  
Soon were our fall effected;  
But for us fights the valiant one  
Whom God Himself elected.  
Ask ye: Who is this?  
Christ Jesus it is,  
Of Sabaoth Lord,  
And there’s none other God;  
He holds the field for ever.”

“A Mighty Fortress is our God” is often treated as the “national anthem” of Protestantism, frequently sung at many and widely

diverse occasions as “required rations” for the event. Not the least is its place in the music of Bach and also Mendelssohn whereby knowledgeable ears have come to know it.

This hymn is Luther’s rendering of Psalm 46: “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.” Of course, we must remember that there are people for whom the words of this hymn do not easily pass over their lips. A Christian professor once said that he could no longer sing the words of stanza 4: “And take they our life, goods, fame, child and wife, let these all be gone . . . .” And for this reason: At the very end of the Second World War bombs had killed almost his entire family. Wife and children were dead. Only the youngest child sitting on mother’s lap survived, still protected by the dying mother’s body and thus still alive within the ruins. We can understand that someone with such experience will choke at these words, despite his Christian faith.

Completely different was my own experience at a Reformation festival in a Lutheran congregation in 1999. That was the year of the signing of the “Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification” by both Lutheran and Roman Catholics leaders. I was scheduled to give a lecture after the worship service. Given the ecumenical atmosphere of the time, members of the church council from the local Roman Catholic congregation had been invited to attend and were present. The pastor conducting the service apologized to the catholic guests that this hymn was to be sung, given its pervasive anti-catholic polemic. Gladly would I have shouted out an objection, but one just doesn’t do that. In my own lecture after the liturgy I added a previously unplanned section about Luther versifying Psalm texts in his hymns, how the certainty of faith in “A Mighty Fortress” is taken from Psalm 46 and recast into German poetry. The confidence expressed in this hymn is the confidence of faith, nothing anti-papal in it at all.

This event comes to mind every time I am dealing with this hymn. The pastor at that time, intent on being ecumenically friendly, had taken the wrong road. So I had to correct that with evidence in my presentation. Whether he himself got the message, I do not know.

Luther was no superficial elitist immune to doubt. In 1540 he wrote: "Yes, I am a theologian and have in many dangerous times done some reading of the holy Scriptures and I do have some experience. Yet I do not consider myself so superior on account of these gifts that I do not every day, as do the children, pray the catechism, that is, the ten commandments, the Apostles creed and the Lord's Prayer. I do so from the heart, not simply rattling off the words, but reflecting on what the individual words want to say . . . . For God gives us that Word so that we may—as it says in Deut. 6:6ff—"keep them in our heart" and "practice" them. Without such daily practice rust grows on the heart, and by that rust we destroy ourselves." [ref]Aland, Luther-Lexikon, S. 186, WA 40 III, S. 192, 16-25 (lat. Text)[/ref]

Luther was not only a wise professor in the public arena, he was also our brother in the faith.

Shortly before his death his wife was worried about him. He had been called to Mansfeld and was now present there. From Mansfeld eleven days before he died, he wrote to her: "Let me be at peace and cease your worry. I have a better one to worry about me, better than you and all the angels. My worrier lies in the manger, nursing at the Virgin's breasts, and at the same time sitting at the right hand of God the Father Almighty. So be at peace. Amen." [ref]WA.B 11, S. 286, 8-12[/ref]

In Luther's last documentable words of 16 February 1546 he spoke of the difficulty of understanding classical texts—Vergil,

Cicero, and even more so, the Bible—without corresponding lived experience. There are different versions of these last words. The Latin can be translated something like this[ref]Vgl [Cf.]. Brecht, Martin Luther, Band [Vol.] 3, S. 369f.[/ref]: “No one can understand Vergil’s *Bucolica* and *Georgica* (poems about the life of shepherds and farmers) who has not spent 5 years as shepherd or farmer. Cicero too in his letters, so it seems to me, no one understands unless for 20 years he has played a major role in civil government. Let no one believe he has tasted the Holy Scriptures unless for 100 years he has pastored congregations with the prophets.” Another version of these final words adds to the prophets the words “John the Baptist, Christ and the apostles.” Understanding the Bible goes beyond human capabilities.

Luther died in his 63rd year. And then in that text above come these words in German: “We are beggars. That is true.”[ref]WA 48, S. 241.[/ref]

One of Luther’s biographers writes: “This final confession of one of the greatest Bible interpreters is by no means meant as resignation over his life-long vocation. The miracle of understanding does indeed occur. But the Bible interpreter who is 100% focused on the people of God while doing his work knew that he exercised his craft humbly, reverently and prayerfully, dependent on God’s marvelous presence. Interpreting the Bible, as was his whole life, was a gift.”[ref]Brecht S. 368.[/ref]

Granted, it is not fitting for us at a Reformation jubilee only to look with pride at our fathers in faith. Surely it is important that we constantly check to see if we have rightly understood them. When I open a newspaper, I often get the impression that the writers imagine that they know everything and thus can pass verdict on everything. Therefore we have considerable criticism of Luther these days. Of course, he was

not without his faults, and he never claimed to be. But he was a very significant witness to the Gospel as the true treasure of the church. We can learn much from him. He himself was captured by the project into which he knew God had placed him. And thereby he could also be fearless, knowing that he stood beneath the protection of the highest Protector.

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# Reflections on Luther the Person, Part 1. (With Quick Notes on the Forthcoming Conference, and on Matthew 25)

Colleagues,

Today's main event is the first part of recent essay by [Professor Rudolf Keller of Regensburg University](#). Dr. Keller, a friend of Ed and Marie Schroeder, spoke at one of our early Crossings conferences. Ed and Marie served as translators for the presentation here. We offer it at as a worthy chaser for the rich three-part piece we sent you last month about Werner Elert's approach to the theological task. Dr. Keller shares Ed's profound appreciation for Elert's work, and for the great confessors who preceded him, Luther above all.

Before we get to this, a couple of quick notes—

First, now is the [time to register](#) for the [Seventh International Crossings Conference](#). It launches two and a half months from now at our usual site in Belleville, Illinois. The topic is urgent.



It could not be more pressing. Christians, after all, are as scared, angry, and at odds with each other as any other batch of citizens in America right now. We dare to assert that the Gospel is God's best gift ever. Then why are we making so little use of it as we respond to the miseries that tumble from our newsfeeds day upon day? Why our fractured participation in the "siege mentality" that David Brooks described in his [New York Times column](#) last Monday? What would God have us see and believe in Christ crucified that would bring us to life and light for the sake of our neighbors? What will it take for Christians as a group to start showing up as the people Paul describes in Philippians 2:15, "children of God without blemish in the midst of crooked and perverse generation, in which you shine like stars in the world"? Dare one hope for so impossible a miracle?

Such will be the thinking, talking, and praying that happens when we get to Belleville. God grant that you can make it.

In case you haven't heard, one of our key presenters, Kit Kleinhans, has recently been appointed Dean of Trinity Lutheran Seminary, Columbus, now enfolded within the administrative structure of Capitol University. Matthew Becker and Stephan Turnbull will also play major roles in cracking open our theme, "The Power of the Gospel for Times Like These." David Zahl, Executive Director of Mockingbird, is among the speakers who will help us name and discuss these times of ours. He lives in Charlottesville, Virginia (enough said). Here's a [sample of his work](#).

Second. At church these days we're in the middle of one of the great stretches of listening that that crop up from time to time in the Revised Common Lectionary. The centerpiece is Matthew 25, all three pieces of it read in a row. At a pericope study last week a colleague surprised me by hauling along a piece I wrote three years ago about this chapter. I had forgotten it. I

looked, scanned, and decided to share again. [Here it is](#), addressing the central question: where is good news in that story of the sheep and the goats?

With that we move to Dr. Keller, and to some ongoing thanks to God for the gift of the Reformation.

Peace and Joy,

Jerry Burce

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## **Luther “Personally” as the Reformation Unfolds: Insights Into His Life and Thought**

By Professor Rudolf Keller

Reichenberg, Germany

September 24, 2017

Do we want to celebrate Luther? Has he become problematic for us? Are we perhaps even a bit ashamed about him?

Four years after his death the pastors of the city of Magdeburg had this to say “. . .even though Luther is now dead, yet he still lives on, and the work which God has begun through him . . . will . . . yet remain forever to the Last day and move out into more countries and peoples.” (1)

Luther himself was very reserved in his self-reflection. In 1522 he put it this way: “First of all I ask that my name would not be used, and that people call themselves Christian and not Lutheran. For what is Luther? The teaching is not mine. I was not crucified for anyone. Saint Paul (I.Cor.3) would not tolerate anyone calling themselves ‘Pauline’ or ‘Petrine,’ but only ‘Christian.’ How then could I, poor stinking bag of

maggots, qualify for having the children of God call themselves by my wretched name? No, dear friends, let us remove the party names and call ourselves Christians. What we have is His teaching . . . .” (2)

Later it became necessary for the sake of clarity to use the term “evangelical-Lutheran” to signal the distinction with the “Reformed.” In the Habsburg territories the same distinction was correctly designated with “Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession.” But Luther himself sought to lead us away from his own person to his message.

In these 500th anniversary days (in Germany) Luther is showing up a great deal in the press, in radio and on TV. For many people that is just too much. Many are pleased that the Roman Catholic church is patently involved in this jubilee year, actually participating in joint celebration. For the Pope himself made a personal journey to Sweden to join leaders of the Lutheran World Federation for a joint celebration at the opening of the jubilee-year on Reformation Day 2016. The Pope readily accepted from the hands of Bishop Bedford-Strohm, spokesman for German Protestants, a copy of the Luther Bible. That is significant.

Today, however, I do not wish to repeat the generally well-known data about Luther and put it on display again. Instead I will try to focus my attention on Luther’s own personality by examining his own words—above all passages from his letters.

It continues to be debated just how the posting of the 95 theses in Wittenberg took place, also how the 95 theses on indulgences became so publicly widespread. It is clear that Luther was not intending to grab for a hammer. And it may well be that there was no pounding hammer at all, allegedly shocking the world.

Luther was putting his theses out for discussion in his

university context. He did so on the Eve of All Saints Day, knowing that on this high festival of medieval Christianity many people would be seeking comfort through indulgences. The theses became an item of public knowledge quickly because the topic itself was of public interest and thus people sought to publicize them.

Already by mid-November the first printing of the theses was available, but not in Wittenberg. Instead it was Nuremberg, a city ten times the size of Wittenberg, a city already peopled with friends of Luther. Printer Hieronymus Hoelzel was the one who published the theses on a (single-page) placard Triggering the publication was Nuremberg-council-consultant Christoph Scheurl who had received a copy of the theses from a Wittenberg canon.(3) When we remember how in those days texts could be sent and move from one place to another, namely, via a messenger on horseback, we get an even clearer picture of how great the interest was in Nuremberg. Scheurl, at this time already working in Nuremberg, had been professor of canon law in Wittenberg from 1507-1511, so he had close connections.

There existed at that time in Nuremberg a group of humanists who were very open to Luther's activity. [For us living today in Franconia in Nuremberg's shadow that's well worth mentioning. But back to the topic of the theses in Wittenberg.] So the theses very quickly became known far and wide.

Whether they were actually nailed to the church door seems to me to be of little importance. Yes, there are marvelous pictures from the 19th century presenting the Wittenberg monk climbing the ladder with hammer in hand. If they were nailed anywhere in the university, then it would have been some university employee whose job it was to do that. Like many such theses for disputation in those days they were discussed in Wittenberg University. And that is why—as was self-understood at that

time—they were written in Latin. There is no controversy about that. And it happened on October 31, 1517.

The issue in the theses was indulgences, the “business” that Johann Tetzel was promoting in order to raise money. Luther’s most important thesis is, of course, thesis 62: “The true treasure of the church is the most holy Gospel of the glory and grace of God.” Luther put his own person far behind this message and placed the Gospel itself at the center, a Gospel—as we’ve already heard—of whose power he was convinced.

It was with these theses that the Wittenberg monk and theology professor first became known in wider circles. On his way to being interrogated by Cardinal Cajetan in Augsburg Luther passed through Nuremberg, staying with his fellow Augustinian monks at the cloister there. Thereby his Nuremberg friends got to know him.

Events became more and more aggravated. The Pope threatened excommunication and later carried through on the threat. That meant exclusion from the church and exclusion from receiving the sacraments. The jolt of excommunication struck Luther hard, but he did not retreat. Instead he did something outrageous on December 10, 1520. He organized a “burning at the stake” outside the Elster gate of Wittenberg and burned both the bull of excommunication and one volume of canon law. That was a much more drastic demonstration than posting the theses. And that occurred not in the protected space of the university but out in public before one of the city gates. The upshot thereof was Luther being summoned to appear before the imperial diet in Worms.

Everybody knew that the young emperor stood on the side of the “old-guard” critics of Luther. The emperor sought to compel Luther to recant, but Luther saw himself incapable of doing so.

Only if he were convinced with clear grounds from Holy Scripture could he recant. Under this pressure and facing this danger he uttered his famous words: "Here I stand. I cannot do otherwise. God help me. Amen."

From these words people have later made Luther into a heroic figure, a hero of faith defying the emperor. In my judgment Luther spoke these words with fear and trembling, for he could not recant because he had no grounds for doing so. Thus the emperor's imperial ban was added to the papal excommunication. Luther was now an outlaw and could expect no protection at all as he began his journey home from Worms.

His electoral prince Frederick the Wise reached for an action specifically fitting for the situation and well thought out. As soon as Luther crossed the border into Thuringia, Frederick organized Luther's "capture" whereby the Wittenberg monk "disappeared" into the Wartburg castle. Earlier I often said that it was "protective custody." But that is not accurate, for Luther was not actually imprisoned; rather he became an unknown Junker Joerg simply removed from the stage, taken out of circulation.

Frederick the Wise, who had never publicly taken sides with Luther, was a careful realist. He knew that this was the only way to protect Luther, to guarantee his safety from attack. We all know how Luther made use of his time at the Wartburg translating the Greek New Testament into German.

Today when so much is being made of Luther's translating the Bible, we need to make it clear how he used being "out of circulation" to do what he could do in such circumstances. This would eventually achieve world-historical significance, namely, rendering the Bible available for every Christian to read. For it is only by free access to God's Word, as it is conveyed to us

in the Bible, that a Christian can learn what God's will is and how God's promises and the gift of forgiveness by grace alone through faith are to be understood.

Luther's hiding place was to be kept very secret so that no one could reach him and lay hands on him. Initially some people thought that with this arrest Luther could already have been killed. But before long there were letters to him and from him, discussions with his friends in Wittenberg and a flow of news.

It was in April 1521 that Luther was brought to the Wartburg. At Christmas-time that year he made a secret short visit to Wittenberg. However later, back at the Wartburg when he heard of the turmoil that Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt was causing with his iconoclasm in Wittenberg, he just had to leave the Wartburg. Early in March 1522 he was in Wittenberg and on Invocavit Sunday (First Sunday in Lent) he began a series of sermons, the "Invocavit Sermons" as we now call them, whereby he brought the turmoil in Wittenberg to an end. It was in this context that he spoke those words about himself that I cited at the beginning.

I have summarized this much of the historical data in order now to present to you a document wherein we encounter Luther at a very personal level. Frederick the Wise wanted Luther to stay at the Wartburg. He feared that Duke George of Saxony, ruler of the neighboring "catholic" Albertine segment of Saxony, would seek to carry out the imperial mandate against Luther the outlaw. But Luther had asked Frederick for permission to return to Wittenberg and resume his calling there. Already on his journey from the Wartburg to Wittenberg he wrote a letter to his electoral prince, a letter that has always amazed subsequent readers, for it is a document of the very heart of his faith. Vis-a-vis his prince he spoke with such frank honesty "in plain German," which is simply extraordinary.

I call it "Luther personal." He begins with thanks, initially using all the appropriate formal terms to address his patron and supporter. Yet he points out to Frederick that he stands responsible to God and to the gospel. Were that not the case he would lose heart.

"But concerning my situation, most gracious Lord, I answer in this way: Your Electoral Grace [Hereafter "Y.E.G."] knows, or may not know, so let it here be known that I did not receive the gospel from humans but solely from heaven through our Lord Jesus Christ. That I could well take praise (which I will now do) as a servant and evangelist praises and writes. That I have offered myself to examination and judgment, which has now happened. Not that I ever doubted, but I did it with excessive humility to attract others.

"However, now I see my excessive humility has led to the Gospel's reduction and the devil has taken over the space where I allowed him but a handbreadth, so I must now from the poverty of my conscience do otherwise. I have satisfied Y.E.G. by retreating for this year in Y.E.G.'s service. For the devil knows quite well that I did not do this because of timidity. He indeed saw my heart as I entered Worms, that had I known how many devils were lying in wait for me—as many as were the tiles on the roofs—I would nevertheless have jumped with joy into the midst of them.

"Granted, Duke George is hardly comparable to any single devil. And because the Father of boundless mercy has made us bold lords over all devils and death by the Gospel and given us the riches of confidence, we may dare to say to him "Dearest Father!"

"Y.E.G. can reckon for himself that with such a Father it would be the highest insult were we not to trust that we also are lords over the wrath of Duke George.



“That I know from experience: If the Leipzig issue (Duke George) were like what is now going on in Wittenberg, I would still want to ride in even if (Y.E.G. pardon my foolish speech) it simply rained Duke Georges for nine days and each Duke George were nine times as mad as he is. He considers my Lord Christ to be a man of straw. My Lord – and I too – can cope with that for quite a while.

“I do not wish to conceal from Y.E.G. that I have never prayed nor shed tears for Duke George that God would open his eyes. I want to do that now one time – pray and shed tears – but after that not again. And I ask that Y.E.G. would also help ask and have others ask whether we can rescue him (please, dear Lord!) from the judgment that presses upon him unceasingly. I would quickly with one word pray Duke George dead, if that would be allowed.

“I write this to Y.E.G. from the perspective of having Y.E.G. know that I am coming to Wittenberg under a much greater protection than that of the Elector. It is also not in my mind to seek protection from Y.E.G. In fact, I believe that I would have greater protection for Y.E.G. than you could have for me. Actually, if I knew that Y.E.G. could and would protect me, I would not come back. In this matter no sword should nor can give aid and counsel. God alone must do that here, apart from any human involvement and assistance. Therefore whoever has the most faith is the one who will do the most protecting here. And because I now sense that Y.E.G.’s faith is still weak, there is no way that I can look to you as the one who could protect and rescue me...” (4)

Frederick the Wise remained anxious. He enacted policies to implement his will to protect Luther in Wittenberg. So Luther had to send another letter. Luther viewed himself as an instrument in God’s hand, and thereby trusted that God could

protect him.

The condemnation from both church and empire were not removed from Luther. Even so, he could continue to work in Wittenberg and also in neighboring places in the realm of his Electoral Prince.

*To be continued. Endnotes will be supplied at the end of next week's second and final installment.*

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## A Reformation Day Epistle

Colleagues,

The Reformation drew scant attention in Cleveland, Ohio today, its 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary notwithstanding. There were no parades in city streets, nor any Lutheran crowds flocking as once they might have to a downtown venue for a jubilant celebration. If any congregations bothered to hold their own muted liturgies, I didn't hear about it. Mine didn't.

After all, it was a working day in America. Then the light faded, and it was Halloween. First things first. The Church's "true treasure," wrote Luther, "is the most holy Gospel of the grace and glory of God" (Thesis 62 of the 95). The kids vastly prefer their sacks of candy. Woe to the parent or pastor who doesn't play along.

Ed Schroeder has written often about Luther's notion of "Platzregen," the Gospel moving like a cloudburst from one place and people to the next. I think I got a glimpse of that phenomenon today. If Cleveland was arid, it showered heavily in

another corner of the world I'm familiar with. Tonight, by way of refreshment, I send you a hefty splash from that particular rainfall. I can't think of a better way to honor the Lord who opened the skies over Wittenberg 500 years ago.

Below is a letter from Willard Burce to a throng that gathered many hours ago for a grand Reformation party at a place called Irelya, deep in the highlands of Papua New Guinea, about two and a half miles east of Wabag, a provincial capital. Willard is my father. He was a month shy of his 25<sup>th</sup> birthday when he and my mother settled at Irelya. The people who invited them there to establish a Lutheran mission outpost had grown up using stone axes. These days their grandchildren use Facebook. Today's celebration is featured there.

Burce spent 40 years in Papua New Guinea. Almost 30 years have gone by since he retired. He continues nonetheless to be remembered and esteemed, especially around Irelya, as the person who "brought us the Good News." Hence the invitation to contribute his thoughts to the great event today. When I learned of this, I asked him to share what he had sent. I got it this morning. This evening I got his permission to share it with you too.

He asked why I would do that. Here is my answer:

First, because he has an uncanny gift for clear and lucid writing in down-to-earth English.

Second, because his letter is a splendid illustration of the very thing that Luther and his colleagues aimed to achieve: a communication of the Gospel to ordinary, down-to-earth human beings who never outgrow their need to hear it.

Third, because some of you, after slogging through the last three Thursday Theology posts, might still be wondering what

Werner Elert meant by “the kerygma.” This letter will show you.

Fourth, because it approaches its recipients with the profound respect that “forgiven sinners” are due on Christ’s account; and for some of us it may serve as a good example of how to do that.

Fifth, because others might be struck, as I was, by the set of questions at the end. They speak vividly to that “Christian ethos” we’ve been reading about these past three weeks, that is, to our quality as people addressed simultaneously by the Law and by the Gospel, never other than sinners, never less than forgiven sinners who dare in Christ to face and confess their sin, and to wrestle with it; who also enjoy God’s constant invitation to hear the Gospel and to revel in it.

Sixth, and quite frankly, because I am proud of my father, and honor him, and continue to this day to learn from him.

Finally, I share this letter with you to cheer your hearts as hearts were cheered—God grant—at Irelya this morning.

Thank God for 1517, for Martin Luther, for every other witness to the Gospel. Thank God, this Reformation Day, for each of you.

Peace and Joy,

Jerry Burce

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**A Letter from Willard L. Burce to the Saints Gathered at Irelya  
(Enga Province, Papua New Guinea) on October 31, 2017**

Eau Claire, Wisconsin

U.S.A.

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Grace and peace to you all from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Thank you for inviting me to celebrate with you the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Reformation.

In 1949 when Elinor and I came to live at Irelya, we did not know your language and you did not know ours. So we communicated with our new neighbors in Tok Pisin with the help of interpreters, and we remember from those days the faithful assistance of Ete, Lambeane, and Timun.

During the 68 years since then, English has become an official language in your country. Today many of you and your children know English well and speak it and use it in conversation and on your phones far better than I. So I will send you these Reformation thoughts in English, a language we now share. I trust that if needed, you will have someone translate my words, and speak them out strongly like your grandfathers did. May God bless your hearing and your celebration.

My subject is: What would Martin Luther say if he were here with you today?

I think if Luther were with us today, he would not talk much about himself. No, he would lift up the name of Jesus Christ and speak to us about him.

He would take us back into the Old Testament Scriptures and show us how Moses and all the prophets were looking ahead, waiting for the coming into the world of Jesus, the Son of God.

Luther might recite for us these words in Psalm 2: "The Lord said to me, you are my Son. Today I have become your Father. Ask of me, and I will make all the nations your inheritance, and the ends of the earth your possession."

In his speaking to us, Martin Luther would lead us to the Jordan River, where John the Baptist was preaching repentance and was baptizing the people who came to him. But when John saw Jesus coming, he said to the people: "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. He must increase and I must decrease."

Martin Luther would then recall Jesus' mighty deeds: healing the sick, opening the eyes of the blind, walking on the water, and even raising the dead.

But even more, Luther would focus our minds on Jesus' words. "I am the Way, and the Truth, and the Life. No one comes to the Father except by me." "The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

And again: "This Good News shall be preached in all the world for a witness to every nation, and then shall the end come."

Luther would then lead us up the hill called Calvary, to the cross of execution, where, on a darkened Friday, Jesus suffered cruel pain and laid down his innocent, holy life for my sins and your sins, and for the sins of the whole world. "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."

Then Luther would take us to the grave where Joseph and Nicodemus laid Jesus' dead body. It is early Sunday morning, and we see that the stone has been rolled away and the grave is empty. We see God's messengers, the holy angels from heaven, and they speak to us: "Why are you looking for the living among the dead? He is not here, he is risen, as he said."

Then Martin would lead us up to the mountain in Galilee where our Lord gathered his disciples together after his resurrection, and where he said to them: "My Father has given me all power in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all

nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Teach them to observe everything that I have commanded you. And look: I am with you always, to the end of the world.”

But Martin would not yet be finished. He would take us to Jerusalem and show us the great crowd of people who had gathered there from countries and places far and near for the festival of Pentecost.

We would recognize the apostles, but something had happened to them: They are filled with the Holy Spirit. Flames like fire from heaven are on their heads, and we hear them proclaiming to the people, boldly and powerfully, the Good News of Jesus, Son of God, Lord and Saviour of the world. “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus, so that your sins may be forgiven.”

Then we see the apostles baptizing the 3000 people who received the Word of the Lord on that day.

Luther would then remind us how, after Pentecost, the Holy Spirit continued adding new hands, new hearts, and new voices to Christ’s flock and his team of witnesses. Paul, Barnabas, Timothy, Luke, Mark, Priscilla, Aquila, Phoebe, and Lydia: these are only a few of their names. But the Lord knows them all. In good times and painful times, in persecution, even in death, they were Christ’s people and his witnesses to the world.

“This Gospel shall be preached in all the world for a witness to every nation, and then shall the end come.”

If Martin were here today, he would lay before our eyes and our minds and hearts the story of how Christ’s mighty Word flowed like a river out into the whole world. From Jerusalem the Good News of forgiveness, life and salvation went out to Judea and

Samaria, to Asia and Africa, to southern and northern Europe. It traveled across the oceans to South and North America, around the globe to Australia and to the islands of the Pacific and to you, in Papua New Guinea.

Luther would urge you never to forget how the Good News of the grace and peace of Christ came to your country, and how the Lord's witnesses brought it into the mountains and valleys, the forests and villages of the Eastern Highlands, Chimbu, the Western Highlands, Enga, Ipili, Duna, Hewa, and more.

For every person everywhere in this world is a creation of God's hand, whom he knows and cares about with equal great and deep love, and for whom he gave his only begotten Son, so that whoever believes in him may not be lost, but have eternal life."

"You are my people, the sheep and lambs of my pasture."

"When I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all people to myself" (John 12:32).

During his life in the years between 1483 and 1546 Martin Luther was a student, a priest, a professor and doctor of theology, a teacher of children, a musician and a writer of hymns, a preacher and pastor, a translator of the Scriptures into the language of his people, a leader, a husband and caring father. He was a witness for the Lord Jesus Christ.

Here is Martin Luther's own confession of faith:

I believe that Jesus Christ, true God, begotten of the Father from eternity, and also true man, born of the virgin Mary, is my Lord, who has redeemed me, a lost and condemned creature, purchased and won me from all sins, death and the power of the devil; not with gold or silver, but with his holy, precious blood and his innocent suffering and death, so that I may be his



own, and live under him in his Kingdom, and serve him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness, just as he has risen from the dead, and lives and reigns to all eternity. This is most certainly true.

If he were here with you at Irelya today, Martin Luther might say Amen and end his sermon at this point. But then he might still want to ask you some personal questions about your daily lives, or about your congregations and your life together as Christian people. Here are a few things he might ask about:

Are you baptized?

Do you know the Ten Commandments and the Apostles' Creed?

Do you fear, love, and trust God more than anything else?

Do you know the Lord's Prayer? Do you pray every day?

Do you love God's Word and listen to it?

Do you think about your parents? Do you respect and honor and help them?

Do you care for your children and pray for them every day?

Do you obey the laws of your government?

Do you have a Bible? Do you read and study it?

Do you have a copy of the Small Catechism? Do you take time to study it?

You fathers and mothers, do you have devotions and prayers with your children and the others who live in your homes?

Do you go with your family to worship on the Lord's day?

Do you help to support your pastor and the outreach of your

congregation?

Do you love your neighbors, pray for them, and assist them when they need your help?

Do you love and honor your wife, or your husband?

Do you think about the poor people in your communities, and help them?

Do you steal?

Do you use your tongue to lie and to harm others?

Do you confess your sins and ask God for forgiveness?

Do you think about what your Baptism into Christ means for you and your life?

Do you come to the Lord's Table?

Do you look forward to his return on the Last Day?

Amen.

+ + +

My Elinor is now 94 years old while I am only 93. *Mitupela i lapun pinis* [We are exceedingly old]. God gave us an eventful life together as missionaries of the Lord and the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod.

We came to Irelya in February, 1949. We moved to Birip in 1961. From 1967 to 1988 we lived at Lae. Since then our home has been at Eau Claire, Wisconsin, USA.

God gave us seven children: Gregory, Amy, Jerome, Mary, Juliana, Carrie, and Charles. We also have 14 grandchildren, and five great-grandchildren.

I am not able to send you a video, but I am sending a few recent photos of Elinor and me and of our two older sons, Greg and Jerry.

Please remember us in your prayers, and may the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

With much love from Elinor and me and our whole family,

Yours in Christ,

Rev. Dr. Willard L. Burce

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## **“Think Gospel, Preach Christ!” Lessons from Elert for Today’s Church (Part 3)**

Colleagues,

See below for the final installment of Ed Schroeder’s “Kerygma, Dogma, and Ethos: What We Preach, What We Confess, Who We Become.” For background I send you again to guest editor’s Stephen Hitchcock’s introduction of the piece in ThTheol 910. And again my sole suggestion as dispatching editor is that you read slowly and with care. You will come at length to one of several issues that are keeping assorted Lutheran camps at arm’s length from each other as they prepare for next Tuesday’s celebration of the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Reformation. Suffice it here to suggest that those who want to digest Luther would do

well to swallow some hefty doses of Elert. Our thanks to Dr. Ed for dispensing this one.

“For freedom Christ has set us free....”

Peace and Joy,

Jerry Burce

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### **Who Can Proclaim the Kerygma?**

The serious heresies in the history of the church have been those aimed at the distinctiveness of the Gospel. That's why Elert's separation of dogmatics and ethics into distinct disciplines led him to highlight the anti-Donatist motif inherent in his separation of the two.

As did Luther, Elert considered what the enduring relevance was of that fourth century heresy for the church's proclamation of the Gospel. Originally, the question was whether those clergy who had renounced Christianity during Diocletian's persecutions could resume their duties. Donatists called into question the saving efficacy of their preaching and the sacraments they celebrated.

In his ecclesiology, Elert takes an anti-Donatist stance and states that “the church is not dependent upon the ethos of men.”[ref]Elert, *Glaube*, p. 400.[/ref]

This means that the empirical ethos of the proclaimer, including his “faith,” or the empirical ethos of the person addressed do not add to nor detract from the content of the message. The specific content of the church's message is what it is simply

because God says so.

That is true even if no one in the world believed it and even if no one's ethos even suggested it. God's two-fold verdict is valid simply because God utters that two-fold verdict. This applies to a person's ethos under law where the empirical behavior might be so "good" that it would suggest that this person cannot be a sinner. It *also* applies to a person's ethos under grace, where a Christian's empirical behavior might be so "bad" that it would suggest that this person cannot possibly be a "forgiven sinner."

For Elert, ethics portrays a person as God perceives—or values—him or her. [ref]Elert, *Ethos*, p. 7.[/ref] Insofar as this theological anthropology is part of the necessary content of the kerygma, it too will appear in dogmatics. But the degree to which the grace-ethos is visible in the ethos of the "earthen vessel" does not affect the nature, extent, or genuineness of the "treasure"—the prescribed or necessary content of the kerygma.

In terms of his favorite passage (2 Corinthians 5:19), Elert might well have said that dogmatics is concerned with the "In Christ, God was reconciling the world... Be reconciled to God." In other words, the *first* announcement, proclaiming the event of the historical Christ, is followed by the *second* announcement—and an imperative addressed to the hearers urging them to appropriate the first announcement for themselves. (*Bericht und Anrede* were Elert's German words for this two-fold message.). Ethics, then, is concerned with the "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation" (2 Corinthians 5:17).

Elert says that both dogmatics and ethics address themselves to the same question: "Who is Christ?" But there are differences. Dogma is doctrine. When dogmatics raises the question "Who is

Christ?" it seeks to understand what the church teaches concerning him ("God was in Christ"). Ethics is the quality or value of a person under God's judgment as factual reality. The ethical inquiry into the nature of Christ is the question of his importance for God's judgment of humans or—and this definition amounts to the same thing—it is the question about the quality of that human person.

The purpose of this ethical inquiry is not the formulation of a correct Christology, but the elaboration of the fact that the Christ-encounter endows human ethos with a new quality: "If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation." [ref]Ibid. p. 177.[/ref]

Elert's anti-Donatist stance asserts that a person's faith or unfaith is ethos, not dogma. Thereby, from another angle, any proposed scheme of *credenda/agenda* (things-to-be-believed/things-to-be-done) for dogmatics/ethics is invalidated. The *credenda/agenda* scheme views dogmatics as concerned with God-human relationships and ethics as concerned with human-human relationships.

But this scheme is invalid because the person who exists in either of the two possible God-human relationships (Law or Gospel) is always and simultaneously in a multitude of human-to-human relationships. An individual's actual ethos is manifested both in relationship to God and in relationships to other humans. The quality of a person's ethos (either under Law or under the Gospel) includes "attitude" and actions toward God as well as attitude and actions toward human fellows.

Ethics treats the quality of human life as it is lived. Under the Law, it is life lived for ourselves, in rebellion against God and in enmity against our neighbor. Under the Gospel, by virtue of Christ's redemption, we live our earthly life in

freedom for others. “To make this clear is the task of theological ethics. [ref]Elert, *Glaube*, p. 514.[/ref]”

Since “faith” towards God is one quality of a person’s life under the Gospel—and “unfaith” or sin the corresponding quality of life under the Law—both of these concepts belong primarily in ethics and not in dogmatics. The content of the word(s) of God as treated by dogmatics is Law or Gospel; the consequence of those words—the realm of ethics—is unfaith and its sinful manifestations *or* faith and its faithful manifestations. The church lives and grows by virtue of what God says, and not by virtue of the ethos of her people. To contradict this is to affirm Donatism.

## **Faith and Works**

Again with Luther, Elert also saw that Pelagianism, another heresy in the early church, continued to threaten the proclamation of the Gospel. In the early fifth century, Pelagius argued humans had the capacity—with God’s grace—to carry out the good works necessary for salvation.

For Elert, the enduring appeal of Pelagianism resulted in the false view that ethics could be taught—and that God’s Law could be instructive for Christians.

Dogmatics concentrates on the core content of the church’s kerygma as it is preached and taught. Although one can teach the core content of the kerygma, one cannot teach the subject matter of ethics. *Ethos as a quality*—as a value bestowed on humans—is *not taught*. Rather ethos is produced by God revealing God’s Law and God’s Gospel, a revelation that creates a relationship. That quality or value cannot be produced even by teaching people what ethos is, what quality they would have *if* they believed, or what quality they will have *if* they do not.

As Luther's apple tree bore apples because it *was* an apple tree and not because it had been taught to do so, so our life *has* specific qualities because we are either a sinner or a forgiven sinner. We do not become a sinner—or a forgiven sinner—by producing, achieving, capturing, learning, or being taught the qualities. The work of God—God's verdict—creates the qualities.

In the dogma (the prescribed or necessary content of the kerygma) we hear what God's creative work is and—and to the extent that God has revealed this—why God is doing it. Ethos is the anthropological manifestation of that work of God. Ethos is the concrete theologically “tangible” human life that really is created by this work of God.

Faith and works, of course, are joined in one and the same forgiven sinner. Likewise, unfaith and its works are joined in one and the same unforgiven sinner. But dogma cannot be coupled with ethos for this reason. This is especially so because ethos is *never empirically clear and definite, but always partially hidden*. In contrast, what God says about Godself and me *in Christ* (dogma) is clear—and must be clear—if faith is to exist at all. For faith is always faith in *that* message and never faith in the qualities I have learned to produce or even such as I see God producing in me.

## **Conclusion**

To articulate “the majesty and certainty” of the Christian church was Elert's life-long agenda. That pair of terms—*Hoheit und Gewissheit* in German—appears often throughout his works. For Elert, this majesty and certainty is grounded in the church's relationship to the Gospel.

Isn't that today's agenda for Christians too, as we seek signposts during this 21st century journey of anxiety and



confusion?

The greatest “danger” to the church’s Gospel-grounding is the law in Elert’s day, in our day, and every day all the way back to the time of the New Testament. One form of the “danger” is “pre-Gospel minimizing” of the law. The law is operative naturally, automatically. It is the way the Creator manages the “old” creation. The church makes this situation worse when its preaching is “law-shy,” when it minimizes the law. In this situation, the church allows the law’s all-pervasive penetration into human life to remain veiled.

As a result, the hearers do not hear the law’s radical call to justify oneself before God. Or, on the other hand, they hear it but not in its radical condemnation. In this way, they delude themselves into believing they have succeeded in justifying themselves before God but without the Gospel.

Another “danger” is “post-Christian maximizing” of the law. This happens in the so-called *tertius usus legis* (third use of the law) or any similar attempts to rehabilitate the law into some combination with the Gospel for the Christian. [ref]Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, VI, 11, 20, 22–23.[/ref]

The “informational” notion of the law in all forms of the third use of the law stems from the notion that humans generally *do not* know what they ought to do. The more realistic truth of the matter is that they do indeed know what they ought to do. The trouble is that they do not *want* to do it. Such an “ethical” dilemma can only be solved by the subject matter of dogmatics, the kerygma.

Elert’s separation of dogmatics and ethics into relative independence from each other is thus related to (though not identical with) his basic and central distinction between Law and Gospel.

For Elert, there is a theological ethos apart from the Gospel. It is the ethos of a sinner. But there is *no dogma apart from the Gospel*. Without the Gospel, there is no kerygma to proclaim, and dogma only comes into existence as the prescription or necessary content of the kerygma.

Because the living Christ—one might even say, because Christ's own *ethos*—is present in the kerygma, there is no place for human ethos, for human biographical qualities, to be part of the saving message. In fact, human ethos *dare not* be part of the kerygma. For if it were, then ethos would become a *competitor to Christ's exclusive claim*.

This proposal to keep ethos distinct from dogma and kerygma does not, however, exclude the “preaching of good works” from Christian proclamation. But it does exclude the legalistic preaching of good works. Christian preaching of good works means reconnecting humans to Christ so they can be free to be Christ's people under his Lordship. Then in this freedom, the Christ-connected persons do *in faith* what the indwelling Spirit with the Spirit's imperatives of grace prompts them to do. [ref]The terms mentioned in this sentence (freedom, Christ as Lord and Master, life “in faith,” the Spirit as living leader, the grace imperatives) are what Elert sees as the evangelical alternatives to the *tertius usus legis* (third use of the Law) as tangible resources for the Christian “ethical life.”[/ref]

Because such preaching is the preaching of Christ, it is kerygma and thus it belongs in the province of dogmatics and not ethics. In contrast, legalistic preaching of good works tells people what good works they ought to do, now that they are Christians. It *mixes* dogma and ethos, which in this instance is also a mixing of Gospel and law. Instead of implanting the indwelling Christ anew, this legalistic preaching is evicting Christ. It is seeking to implant God's written code—or worse yet, the

preacher's own code—in place of the living “mind” of Christ.

Whether presented as God's “rules for living” or the preacher's notions of good works, such preaching offers a false—one might say, deadly—solution to life under the law apart from the Gospel: we know we ought to do, but we do not *want* to do it. Such an “ethical” dilemma can only be solved by the subject matter of dogmatics, the kerygma—which is always Christ himself.

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## **“Think Gospel, Preach Christ!” Lessons from Elert for Today's Church (Part 2)**

Colleagues,

Here is the second installment of Ed Schroeder's “Kerygma, Dogma, and Ethos: What We Preach, What We Confess, Who We Become.” There is much to digest here. Chew slowly, with thanks to God.

Installment Three will follow in seven days. For the story behind this essay, see last week's introduction by guest editor Stephen Hitchcock.

Peace and Joy,  
Jerry Burce

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## The Center in Elert's Theology

Elert's definition of dogmatics and ethics rests on his notion of the heart of Christian theology: *the distinction between Law and Gospel*. The Scriptures themselves, says Elert, convey nothing about God apart from the rubrics of Law and Gospel. There is no undifferentiated "neutral" revelation of God in the Scriptures.

The rubrics Law and Gospel refer to the "double dialectic" about God and humans that comes into being by virtue of God's revelation. Law/Gospel, on the one hand, indicates the wrath/grace dialectic in God's own self and, on the other hand, the sin/faith dialectic in humans. The dialectic of Christian theology is not God vs. humans. Rather the dialectic is wrath/sin vs. mercy/faith, two antithetical relationships between God and his human creatures.

However, the revelations of God's wrath and grace—and the correlative revelations of our human sin and faith—are *not* the uncovering of secrets, nor the transmission of previously unknown information, but the *creation of a reality*. Elert calls this reality created by God's words of wrath and grace the *Geltung* (validity and effectiveness) of those two words. Despite the apparent paradox of those two words, both are "valid," namely, God puts each of God's two creative words into effect.

Therefore, the Law and Gospel tension cannot be resolved by subsuming the terminology or the content into a higher unity. The *Geltung*—the effective presence of two contradictory realities—is the point of conflict. If there is to be reconciliation between these two contradictory realities, it will only come from the One who stands behind them and who puts them into effect. This is exactly what happened through the manifestation of Christ.[ref] Elert, Glaube, p. 141. [/ref] In

Christ these conflicting realities were reconciled.

That is why the New Testament views *Christ as the central content of the Gospel*. He is the Gospel's content in two dimensions: first, as the announcement of the historical words and events of Christ's ministry *together with* a second announcement of the theological consequence of these words and events for the relationship between God and humans.

Thus the announcement that "in Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself " (2 Corinthians 5:19) is followed by "We beseech you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God." This second announcement is the hortatory proclamation of the consequence or significance of the announcement for the hearers and readers. This hortatory announcement calls for faith, but not faith in general, not even faith in God, but faith in the Gospel, the central content of which is Christ.

The alternative operative reality called "Law" is indicated by the apostles when they label their life before they had faith in the Gospel as a life "under the law." When they came to faith in the Gospel, it was their "redemption from this life under the law." [ref] Ibid., p. 130. [/ref]

Because ancient Israel had a verbalized and codified law, it was easy for her to have a mistaken concept of God's law. Elert calls this mistaken concept the "moral misunderstanding," to which even the ancient church succumbed. [ref] Ibid., p. 131. [/ref] But the revelation of "law" is *not* the revealing of moral legislation and the resulting legal knowledge of God. The revelation of the law takes place not by its being verbalized, but rather by its *de facto* being put into effect. Law is being revealed *when its fatal consequences are taking place*, when the sinful human is being provoked to exorbitant rebellion against God. The law is revealed when wrath, curse, and death are in

effect and operative.

The revelation of the law does not have to be verbally expressed to be in action. By contrast, however, *the Gospel must be expressed*. This Gospel was “originally spoken in the person of Christ, and subsequently proclaimed by the apostles,” in order for it to be revealed and to be operative.[ref]Ibid.[/ref]God’s law can be and has been preached vocally and verbally, but it is also in effect and operative on those to whom it was not verbally addressed. As Elert puts it, “The Law of God is effective also where it is not known.”[ref] Ibid., p. 131f. [/ref]

## **Christ and the Law**

Elert contrasts this concept of the law with the “moral misunderstanding” that views the law only as God’s legislation. Law is not simply God’s legislation but *God in action administering justice*[ref]A concise summary of the law as God in action administering justice is presented in Werner Elert, *Law and Gospel*, translated by Edward H. Schroder (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967), pp. 7ff. [/ref] This is the law that “always accuses” (cf. the *lex semper accusat* of the Lutheran Confessions). Thus the law is never simply divine information, but rather divine accusation, divine condemnation, and divine execution. This radical judgmental character of the law is central to Elert’s view of the important relation between Christ and the law. In a word: the law killed Jesus.

Elert points out that not only Paul but also John’s Gospel (1:17) *contrast* Christ with the law. Therefore, *Christ is no lawgiver*. The united testimony of the New Testament is that Christ was not on the giving but rather the receiving end of the law. If nothing else, Christ’s death testifies that he was “under the Law.” Although the law killed him, the end result of

his willing submission to the law is that *Christ silenced the law*. His death destroyed the law's "order of death" and brought life and resurrection into human history. As Paul tells the Corinthians, "in Christ, God was reconciling," not for Christ's own sake, but *pro nobis* (for us).

The *pro nobis* of the Gospel turns the announcement into an exhortation. For all who receive this exhortation in faith, the revelation of Christ is the revelation of the grace of God *and* the veiling of God's wrath. The paradox that God's wrath is *both revealed and done away with* cannot be grasped and understood apart from faith in Christ, the One in whom the paradox of God's grace and wrath is finally resolved[ref]Elert, *Glaube*, p. 143.[/ref]

Faith *in* this Gospel is faith in the promise that, because of Christ, the paradox of our relationship to God is now resolved. Ours is always "faith *against* the law, faith against appearances, faith against the God of wrath and judgment,"[ref]Ibid., p. 504.[/ref] "against the death verdict." [ref]Ibid., p. 460. [/ref] The paradox is always and only resolved in faith, specifically in faith in Christ. Christ is the only entity we can interpose "against" the law, wrath, judgment, and death that continue as one paradoxical side of Christian human existence.

### **The Shape of Elert's "Ethics"**

Many in the Christian tradition have shaped their writing about ethics around the basic question, "What ought I do?" Elert, though, says that question is inadmissible, for it necessarily winds up with the law. Even though such ethics admit the need for the grace of God in Jesus Christ, and thus avoid crass synergism, the law invariably has the last word. In this view, the Gospel of grace in Jesus Christ is used to help humans serve the law.

For Elert, the truth of Christian ethics is, of course, the exact opposite. The law is ultimately subject to and subjugated by the Gospel, for the Gospel is the “last word.”

An ethics oriented to God’s verdict about humans cannot simply dismiss the law but will have to deal with it. But how? Elert begins with the claim that the essence of life under the law is *thesemper accusat*. Life under the law is a life that is always under accusation, always under critique. That puts us under God’s negative verdict. Elert uses the qualitative rubric “nomological existence” to describe our life under the law.

Understanding nomological existence or acknowledging it does not by itself make an ethics Christian. Rather *Christian* ethics first enters the picture when we heed another of God’s pronouncements: the assurance of forgiveness. Not God’s law as rules, regulations, demands, commandments, prohibitions, but rather God’s verdict about us as humans is what Christian ethics presents.

Furthermore, the distinctive verdict of God that brings about the distinctive quality of the Christian is God’s verdict of the Gospel.[ref] Elert, *Ethos*, p. 16. [/ref] Therefore Elert says that Christian ethics “must approach its subject from two directions.”[ref]Ibid.[/ref] It must examine, first, our quality under God’s verdict of the law and, second and necessarily, our quality under God’s verdict of the Gospel.

So Part I of Elert’s ethics is “Ethos Under Law,” which treats the quality of our life in God’s perspective, whether or not we acknowledge this quality of life. Part II is “Ethos Under Grace,” which treats the person and work of Christ as his saving work *changes* the “quality” of humans.

## **The Church’s Role**



After these two major units, Elert unexpectedly adds a third part called "Objective Ethos." The term "objective" here is used in contrast to the "subjective" individualized ethos of Parts I and II, where individual human subjects are the subject matter. This third section on "Objective Ethos" considers *the church as a whole*. For Elert, the church is a community that is "still something other than the sum total of all Christians." [ref] Ibid., p. 19. [/ref] The *community as a whole* is also subject to the judgment of God.

For Elert, the law is operative even if it is not proclaimed. Thus God does not "need" the church to get *this* word of divine judgment communicated. The wrath of God and God's justice upon the sinner happen "naturally."

But the Gospel does not happen "naturally." *It is operative only by special effort*. Christ's ministry is the special effort that brought the Gospel into existence. And where this Gospel is not proclaimed by Christ's people in efforts corresponding to Christ's own ministry, the Gospel is not present and operative. But God really does want this Gospel, his last and final word, revealed to humans. Therefore, God has instituted the church for this role of ambassadorial communication (2 Corinthians 5:19-20).

As God's ambassador, the church does not function "creatively" in producing her message. Rather the church passes on what she has been commissioned to speak by the One who authorized her. Not only in her life but also in her message, the church is "following after" (*Nachfolge*) Christ. The church speaks God's Word *after* Christ so that her theology is not her word about God, but her communication of *God's Word about God's self*. The church does not communicate how she "feels" about God, but rather announces God's Word about how God "feels" toward humans.

In executing its ambassadorial role, however, the church is not simply “on her own.” God is personally present in the church. For it is *God’s* church, and God supervises the work the church does on behalf of God. God’s personal presence—God’s supervision—is the Holy Spirit. The Spirit functions as the “plant director” for the church’s operation. The Spirit is God present in the church promoting God’s own Gospel.

### **The Link between Dogmatics and Ethics**

Dogmatics is concerned with the “that” (*Dass*) and the “what” (*Was*) of the divine speech. Ethics is concerned with the actual “quality” that a human life takes on when we are the recipient of that particular divine speech.

Elert calls the relation between dogma and ethos the relation between cause and effect. *Dogma*—the essential Gospel content of the church’s kerygma—produces in those who trust that Gospel the new *ethos*—or quality—of “forgiven sinners.” The essential content of the other message, the law (whether consciously perceived or not) produces the equally genuine qualification of “sinners.”

For Elert, dogmatics investigates *what* God says we humans are—together with the need, the grounds, and the urgency of that divine communication. Dogmatics is the discipline oriented to and focused on the kerygma, past and present. Ethics, on the other hand, investigates what we humans are by virtue of that proclamation. Ethics is oriented toward those who are the object of the proclamation. Ethics describes what happens “qualitatively” to them and in them.

One might ask whether the common focus on Law and Gospel might not establish some common bond between dogmatics and ethics. Is there a bond in addition to the cause-and-effect connection already mentioned? The answer is obviously “yes,” but not in the

sense that we could assign either Law or Gospel to one or the other discipline. Insofar as both Law and Gospel are God's speech, *both belong in dogmatics*. And, insofar as both have an operative effect on people qualifying their actual existence, *both belong in ethics*.

For Elert, the common concern with Law and Gospel is the common concern of all theology – historical, exegetical, or practical. In fact, what makes any history, any philology, any systematics, *theological*, is that God's verdicts are being heard in, with, and under it. And there are *only two verdicts* from God: judgment and grace, Law and Gospel. Elert states simply that there is no third option.

### **Why Distinguish Law and Gospel?**

There is another way to see how Elert's understanding of Law and Gospel leads to his distinction between the disciplines of dogmatics and ethics. The sufficient reason or grounds for the Lutheran passion for the radical distinction of Law and Gospel is not Biblicistic ("That is the way it is in the Bible") nor traditional ("That has always been the Lutheran position"). Rather, the grounds for the distinction of Law and Gospel is Christological and pastoral.

The Lutheran Confessions, to which Elert is committed, criticize the "mixing" of Law and Gospel in medieval Roman theology on precisely such Christological and pastoral grounds. In urging this distinction, the confessions note the consequence of mixing Law and Gospel:

- the merits and benefits of Christ are reduced, and Christ is dis-graced;
- the gift character of the Gospel is turned into performance-demanding law; and
- disturbed sinners are robbed of the genuine comfort which

God wants them to have.[ref] Cf. Apology to the Augsburg Confession IV, 18, 81, 110, 120, 150, 157, 204f.[/ref]

Thus Law and Gospel must be kept distinct from each other for the sake of the Gospel, for Christ's sake. It is not enough for Christian theology to insist, "Let God be God." It must also insist, "Let Christ Be Christ." The corollary to letting Christ be Christ is to "let the law be law." The law dare not be "evangelized." Only Christ has taken the sting and strength out of the law with his death.

Thus, any attempt to manipulate the law into some sort of merger with the Gospel is finally a vote of "no confidence" in Christ. In his monograph on Law and Gospel, Elert criticizes the peaceful coexistence of Law and Gospel in Calvin's theology. Elert says: "Thereby the law is actually disarmed. . . . which carries with it the consequence that the Gospel also is similarly reduced in power." [ref] Elert, *Law and Gospel*, p, 46f[/ref]