

# **“Think Gospel, Preach Christ!” Lessons from Elert for Today’s Church (Part 1)**

Colleagues,

Here is the first helping of the treat I promised you last Sunday, an essay by Ed Schroeder. Guest editor Stephen Hitchcock will set the table. The topic line above is my fault, not Ed’s or Steve’s. If someone else can conjure a better ten-word summary of what you’re about to work through, do tell.

Peace and Joy,  
Jerry Burce

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## ***Introduction***

In this, the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, declines in attendance and offerings have left many anxious that the church’s message no longer appeals to today’s hearers. In our broader society, the intensely partisan nature of almost every dimension of life raises questions about the role of the church and of individual Christians in politics and civil society.

In the midst of this anxiety and confusion, the essay below offers insights that can help us grasp the essence of our proclamation of the Gospel as well as the core of the doctrine or dogma that serves as a foundation of our life as Christians.

In particular, as we observe the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Luther's posting of his 95 theses, [more than half of all American Protestants](#) say that *both* good deeds *and* faith are needed for salvation.

At a time when so many fail to grasp the central tenet of Luther's teaching, the theology of Werner Elert [ref] Werner Elert, a Lutheran theologian, was born Aug. 19, 1885, in Heldrungen, Saxony, and died Nov. 21, 1954. Following his education at the universities of Breslau, Erlangen, and Leipzig (1906-1912), he served as pastor at Seefeld in Pomerania (1912-1919), director of the Lutheran Seminary at Breslau (1919-1923), and *Professor Ordinarius* at Erlangen (1923-1954). Among his chief works are *Morphologie des Luthertums*, 2 vols. (1931-1932, Eng. [Vol. 1]: *The Structure of Lutheranism*, 1962); *Der christliche Glaube* (1940); and *Das christliche Ethos* (1949, Eng.: *The Christian Ethos*, 1957).[/ref] can be instructive. Based on his close study of Luther and the Book of Concord, Elert insisted that the church's dogma prescribes the necessary content of its kerygma or proclamation—and the prescribed content of that kerygma is Christ himself. Prescribed is not only "Christ himself," but "Christ alone with no addenda." *Satis est* ('that is enough') was the Augsburg confessors' Latin predicate to "Christ alone."

Without adherence to "Christ alone with no addenda," the church's proclamation too easily defaults to "works righteousness." Anything less than Christ alone becomes the futile—and deadly—attempt to justify ourselves apart from faith in the promise of our new creation through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The essay below represents an edited version of a summary (*Concordia Theological Monthly* 36:11, December, 1965) of one chapter of a dissertation written by Edward H. Schroeder and

submitted to the theological faculty of the University of Hamburg in 1963: *The Relationship Between Dogmatics and Ethics in the Thought of Elert, Barth, and Troeltsch*.

In revising the language and syntax of this essay, Ed Schroeder offered valuable clarifications and corrections. In several instances, new text was supplied to make Elert's analysis more understandable to today's reader. Throughout this process, Marie Schroeder and Ronald Neustadt contributed extensive editorial assistance. We can all rejoice that we continue to have opportunities to learn from one of the founders of the Crossings Community.

*Stephen Hitchcock*  
*September 2017*

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### ***Kerygma, Dogma, and Ethos:***

#### **What We Preach, What We Confess, Who We Become**

by Edward H. Schroeder

#### **Elert's Foundational Definitions**

A concern for dogmatics and a concern for ethics do not always go together. Werner Elert's Lutheranism led him to say yes to both a separate dogmatics and a separate ethics based on a specific understanding of their relation to each other.

Convinced that dogmatics and ethics are two distinctly different enterprises, Elert wrote separate volumes for each. His book on dogmatics he called *Der Christliche Glaube* (The Christian Faith) and his book on ethics *Das Christliche Ethos* (The Christian Ethos).

Here is how Elert comes to that conclusion. He begins by defining the four key concepts—dogmatics, ethics, dogma, and ethos. Dogmatics and ethics are separate theological sciences or disciplines. They are separate because they investigate two different subject matters: dogma and ethos. They are scientific in the same sense that other intellectual disciplines are scientific. That is, they follow a critical process (in the sense of *krisis*—making judgments) of asking and answering the question of the “sufficient grounds” for any claim made about any subject matter. In simple words, they ask the why? Question: “Why, for what reason finally, is this or that Christian claim made?”

Dogmatics does this with Christian dogma; ethics does this with the Christian ethos. The disciplines of dogmatics and ethics are separate and distinct because dogma and ethos are distinct entities.

Elert’s study of early church history convinced him that when Christians in that era (Greek speakers) used the word “dogma,” they understood it to mean “prescription.” Those early Christians asserted that dogma is the prescription for the kerygma, kerygma being their Greek word for Christian proclamation.

In Elert’s view, *only two explicit dogmas* were formulated in the early church: the Trinitarian dogma and the Christological dogma. The first dogma prescribes that, when God is proclaimed, you shall use the language of Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The second prescription is that, when salvation is proclaimed, you shall speak of the second person of the Trinity enfleshed in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth.

And the overarching rubric in these prescriptions is that, when

you are proclaiming the Trinitarian God and the Christological message of salvation, it shall strike the hearers' ears as good news, the good news—about God and about salvation—that came with Jesus.

The Biblical report of Paul on Mars Hill in Athens (Acts 17:22ff) suggests that dozens of other prescriptions for God-talk and for salvation-talk were on the scene when the Christian message was first being proclaimed.

Thus dogma is the required or necessary content of the kerygma. The kerygma is the primal Christian message. Dogma prescribes the necessary minimum—and maximum—content of the kerygma that is required to keep it what it was originally intended to be.

### **Dogma's Authority**

For Elert, dogma is neither what you have to believe (*credenda*) nor what you have to teach (*docenda*). Rather, dogma is what has to be preached (*praedicanda*) if the proclamation is to be Christian. The opposite of dogma is heresy—that which must *not* be preached under the guise of Christian proclamation. In this sense dogma is also the maximum necessary content of the kerygma. The “have to” in the sentence above signals a requirement, and that raises the question of authority: “By whose authority is this a requirement?”

When Christians refer to their dogmatic formulations as “confessions,” they are already indicating that the authority of their confessions is secondary. Confessions are responses to something prior, and the term “confessions” indicates that they are freely given. The confessions are not coerced; they are the personal convictions and commitment of the confessors. The authority of the dogma does not consist in coercion to believe something, but rather in the binding obligation and commitment to preach and teach something.

Neither the confessions—nor the ancient dogmas preceding them—stand first in line as authorities for a book on dogmatics. Those confessions and the ancient dogmas preceding them do not have the ultimate authority. Rather they come with derivative authority. *The original or primary source and authority is the Gospel itself—or even the Gospel “Himself,” Christ.* Both church dogma and church confessions are “confessions to the Gospel.” They are confessions to a message previously heard, trusted, and now confessed as authoritative for the one confessing.[ref] Werner Elert, *Der Christliche Glaube. Grundlinien der Lutherischen Dogmatik*, 4th ed. (Berlin: Furche-Verlag, 1940), pp. 38f. Hereafter cited as *Glaube*.[/ref]

In seeking the sufficient grounds of this dogma, dogmatics is forced back behind the confessions and into the Bible in order to formulate the required content of the kerygma. However, just because kerygma is in the Bible is not “sufficient grounds” for its being authorized.[ref] A favorite illustration of this for Elert is the passage in Jude 9 about Michael and Satan arguing over the body of Moses. Ibid., p. 261.[/ref]

As the dogmatician attends to the canonical books of the Bible—to which the church also listens—she must listen to the kerygma. And this means listening to Christ himself. The centrality of Christ’s own person is that he is the one absolute point, the irreplaceable center, in all the canonical documents. Christ is both “the authorizer as well as the content of the church’s kerygma because in Christ the formal and the material *Sollen* (what should be *in* the proclamation”) coincide.”[ref] Ibid., p. 51. [/ref]

Of course, when we get all the way back to Christ himself, we learn that Christ claimed God himself as his authority for the kerygma. Thus the sufficient grounds of the church’s dogma finally is “thus says the Lord.” God himself authorizes this

kerygma with precisely this prescribed content.

### **What then is Christian Ethos?**

Ethos is a qualitative label. "Value-words" are used in discussing Christian ethos: sinner/righteous, condemned/redeemed, lost/saved. Christian ethos is that quality—that value—that a person receives by virtue of God's own verdict about that person.

In defining ethics and its subject matter—the Christian ethos—Elert says that ethos is not descriptive of what Christians do, *nor* is ethos the *prescriptions* that they seek to follow. Ethos is not the corresponding *agenda* (what you must do) to the *credenda* (*what you have to believe*). That notion of dogma—dogma as what you must believe—Elert had already rejected when he specified the task of dogmatics.

Although the Christian ethos is normative, it is *not normative in terms of the laws* that guide one's daily life. Ethos is the quality—the value—that humans receive by virtue of God's verdict upon them. Therefore, the central task of theological ethics is to determine the sufficient grounds of God's judgment: what is it and how can we ascertain the quality of that divine judgment?

In this sense "kerygma and ethos stand in the same relation to each other as cause and effect." [ref] Werner Elert, *Das christliche Ethos: Grundlinien der lutherischen Ethik* (Tubingen: FurcheVerlag, 1949). English translation: *The Christian Ethos* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1957), p. 15. Hereafter cited as *Ethos*. [/ref] The dogma in dogmatics delineates what has to be preached; the Christian ethos of ethics is the quality of our life that comes when we hear and believe the kerygma.

Thus, without the kerygma of the church—of which dogma represents the prescribed content—there can be no Christian

ethos.

But the cause-effect relationship is not automatic. The Christian ethos is not the necessary consequence that must follow in us when we have encountered the kerygma. Instead Elert's emphasis is that when God's verdict about us changes, *our quality and worth also thereby change*. This change takes place because we have come in contact with the kerygma, and in our believing its prescribed content—that is, Jesus Christ—the quality of our existence has changed.

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## Ecumenical Preaching

Colleagues,

Steven Kuhl recently sent me today's offering. It first appeared twelve years in a publication that later went out of business. You will join me, I'm sure, in agreeing with Steve about its fitness for a rerun as the monumental Reformation anniversary looms. For more on that, see the Afterword.

Peace and Joy,

Jerry Burce

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### The CORE of Ecumenical Preaching

First Published in *Preach* (January/February 2005) now defunct

by Steven C. Kuhl

Forty years ago the Second Vatican Council issued its *Decree On Ecumenism* (*Unitatis Redintegratio*, 1964). While that decree did not start the ecumenical movement, it certainly expanded it, bringing into the movement the largest body of Christians in the world: the Roman Catholic communion. Not only did that decree add to the numbers of those involved in ecumenism, it added enthusiasm, momentum, and hope. Ecumenism, as the council articulated it, is not a luxury to be entertained as time permits, but an essential characteristic of the church catholic. Indeed, it is an expression of the deep yearning of the church catholic, a sign of prayer being answered, specifically, the high priestly prayer of none other than the head of the church himself, Jesus Christ: “that [his disciples] may become completely one” (John 17:23 [NRSV]).

As an ordained preacher of over twenty years in the Lutheran Communion (ELCA), I have great appreciation for the steps Vatican II took in ecumenism. Because of those steps, I share with most of the preachers who read these pages this fact: We have no experience of a time in the church when ecumenical preaching (preaching in intentionally ecumenical gatherings) wasn’t practiced. Moreover, most of my experience in ecumenical preaching has happened on the grassroots level, usually in conjunction with the local clergy associations—and I suspect that is the experience of most other preachers as well. On the grassroots level, ecumenical gatherings happen for all kinds of reasons—from annual, community-wide Thanksgiving or Good Friday services to midweek Lenten and Advent devotions to times of national mourning and national crisis. Without exception, at the center of these ecumenical gatherings stands preaching.

Ecumenical preaching, therefore, must always be aware of the diverse Christian experience of the people who gather and knowledgeable regarding the variety of Christian traditions represented. To that end, there is no better ongoing preparation

for the task of ecumenical preaching than for preachers to participate regularly in their local clergy associations. Only through such association will ecumenical preachers gain the needed sensitivity, trust, and courage to preach the word that is intended to unite them. In addition, the ecumenical preacher must remember that the people who gather are already deeply Christian in their faith. Above all else, they come believing that they share such a bond in Christ Jesus with fellow Christians from other traditions that they can both give common expression to that faith through prayer and song and be nurtured in that faith through word and preaching. Therefore, the task of ecumenical preaching is the task of preaching generally—to share the good news of Jesus Christ and to rally and unite the people of God in that good news—and the burden that every ecumenical preacher bears is exactly that which St. Paul expressed: “If I proclaim the gospel, this gives me no ground for boasting, for an obligation is laid on me, and woe to me if I do not proclaim the gospel!” (1 Corinthians 9:16 [NRSV]).

### **The CORE of the message**

At the risk of being cute, let me suggest that at a minimum ecumenical preaching is always about proclaiming the “CORE” of the Christian message. That is, ecumenical preaching is catholic, orthodox, reforming, and evangelical. These words, each of which has special significance for four major Christian traditions, represent aspects of the Christian message that are indispensable to good ecumenical preaching.

First, ecumenical preaching is “catholic” with a lower-case “c.” The word “catholic” comes from a Greek word that is usually rendered “universal,” but that may just as well be rendered “according to the whole.” Ignatius of Antioch records the earliest use of the term “catholic” and defines it this way: “Wherever Jesus Christ is there is the catholic Church,” i.e.,

church in its totality (*Letter to the Smyrnaens*, 8.2). Catholicity, therefore, does not mean uniformity, but totality, a diversity that finds unity in Jesus Christ. To use the language of Vatican II, we might say that the church catholic, the church in its totality, “subsists” in every local assembly where Jesus Christ is proclaimed and present. While the assembled body of Christ in any given place is only *part* of the world-wide church, and while the full extent of the diversity of that world-wide church’s prayer and song is only *partially* expressed in any given local assembly, nevertheless, every local assembly is theologically and Christologically church in its *totality*, the church catholic, the body of Christ in that place. Ecumenical preaching needs to be aware of this catholic character of any local assembly and name it for the sake of the assembly.

Second, ecumenical preaching is “orthodox” with a lower-case “o.” The word “orthodox” comes from two Greek words: *ortho* meaning “straight” and *doxa* meaning “opinion.” Historically, to be orthodox means to be committed to the “right teaching” about God (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) and Jesus Christ (the Son incarnated, fully divine and fully human, yet one person). But the word *doxa* also means “glory,” as in doxology. Accordingly, right teaching is inseparable from right praising, as the old dictum *lex orandi, lex credendi* (the law of praying is the law of believing) underscores. To highlight this fact, ecumenical worship services would do well to include the marks of orthodoxy in the liturgy itself. They should include the ancient teaching symbols of the church orthodox (the Nicene and the Apostles’ Creeds and the Lord’s Prayer) and draw on the central liturgical actions associated with that orthodoxy in Christian baptism (sprinkling, laying on of hands, anointing, and so on), so that ecumenical preaching might explore the meaning of these symbols and actions as a shared heritage. Of

course, chief among the marks of orthodoxy is Holy Scripture itself. Accordingly, ecumenical preaching needs to be quite self-consciously biblically rooted, but in a way that understands the “root” of the Bible to be Jesus Christ himself as he is identified in the teaching symbols and liturgical actions of orthodoxy.

Third, ecumenical preaching is “reforming” with a lower case “r.” One of the fruits of the sixteenth-century Reformation was the realization by the church catholic that the “the church is always reforming,” *ecclesia semper reformanda*. For the church to live in a posture that is always open to reform is not a sign of shame or instability or uncertainty. On the contrary, it is a sign of health and confidence that the word of God through which the church is created and sustained is a living word that forms and shapes the witness of the church to meet the challenges of each new day. Traditionalism (the determination to “hang onto” past forms of faith) is the mark of a church that fears the reforming character of the living word; Tradition (the dynamic process of “handing on” the faith in forms that serve the gospel) is the mark of a church that trusts the reforming character of the living word. Ecumenical preaching would do well to proclaim the stories and instances of how the “tradition of reform” informs all of our traditions and how that may be one of the most vital aspects of the Christian tradition that the ecumenical movement has going for it. *Aggiornamento*, renewal, renaissance, reform—regardless of what we call it, the tradition of reform is a most valuable mark of the church.

Fourth, ecumenical preaching is “evangelical” with a lower case “e.” In light of the fact that the word “evangelical” comes from the Greek word meaning “to preach good news,” to say that ecumenical preaching is evangelical is almost redundant. Of course, preaching is preaching. Now it probably doesn’t hurt if preaching is done with rhetorical flair or witty humor or moving

stories, but that is not what makes Christian preaching “good,” as in “good news” or evangelical. Taking a cue from the letter to the Ephesians, ecumenical preaching that is evangelical always has the salvation of the hearer (that is, the healing of the sinner) through grace, Christ, and faith as its overall story-line, a salvation that issues forth with great benefits—“good works”—for the world: “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life” (Ephesians 2:8–10 [NRSV]). Ecumenical preaching, especially, would do well to be clear on the story-line. For as the letter to the Ephesians underscores, that story-line is the source and the summit of the church’s unity: one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all (see Ephesians 4:4–6).

### **More to the CORE**

Any astute student of the ecumenical scene will notice that my “CORE” acronym leaves out one very important aspect of the Christian message that was trumpeted by the so-called Radicals of the Reformation. Therefore, we dare not forget that ecumenical preaching at its core is also “radical” with a lower-case “r.” I suppose we could say the core message of the gospel is always “CORER,” more radical than conventional church proclamation and practice is willing to entertain. Ecumenical preaching majors in reminding the church of that. We often think of the word “radical” today as meaning *intentionally* provocative, disruptive, destabilizing. While it may be all that, that’s not *necessarily* its intention. The word “radical” comes from the Latin word *radix*, which means to get back to our “roots.” The constant temptation of the church is to collapse gospel religion into civil religion, to confuse the church’s “spiritual” agenda

with the world's "secular" agenda, to seek the approval of the powerful and the wealthy rather than to identify with the weak and the poor. The "radical" nature of the Christian message does underscore God's "preferential option for the poor," as Mary virgin mild clearly expressed in the Magnificat (Luke 1:46–55), and ecumenical preaching would do well to make that clear also.

By focusing on the CORE elements of the Christian message, ecumenical preaching attends to both the reconciliation of the world to God and the unity of the church, two realities that are intimately intertwined. For what is the church but the world being reconciled to God, and what is the mission of the church but to preach the reconciliation of the world to God, and where better to emphasize this than in grassroots ecumenical gatherings, where the church in the midst of the world can witness to its oneness in Christ? This, among other things, is the meaning of Jesus' high priestly prayer as he prays "that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me" (John 17:23 [NRSV]).

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## **Afterword**

I wrote this piece in 2005 while teaching at St. Francis Seminary, Milwaukee, and had it published in a Catholic magazine called *Preach*, which is now defunct. Come to think of it, association with now defunct organizations or institutions seems to be the story of my life. McDonnell Douglas Corporation, the company where I worked as an engineer: defunct. Christ Seminary-Seminex, which nurtured and shaped me theologically: defunct. The Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches, which ordained me for ministry: defunct. St. Francis de Sales (Roman Catholic) Seminary, which launched me into teaching: defunct. Thankfully, what has not gone "defunct" in the midst of all this is the

preaching of the Word. That God graciously sees fit to let remain forever, which brings me back to the article.

As one responsible for teaching Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations at St. Francis Seminary, I was asked to write an article on "ecumenical preaching." As we now commemorate the 500th Anniversary of the Reformation, it seems to me that the article is still timely. For as Robert Bertram once noted, one of the distinguishing features of confessing the faith for the Lutheran Reformers was the insistence that it always seeks to be ecumenical, meaning, it is always "interest[ed] in churchly consensus as reunion." [Robert W. Bertram, *A Time for Confessing*, ed. Michael Hoy (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co. 2008), p. 8.] And wouldn't you know it. That "interest" is at the forefront of this 500 commemoration of the Reformation. After 500 years, we seem to have come, at least, this far: We, the churches who have our roots in the Reformation, no longer see what happened back then as simply a sectarian act of everyone asserting their rights to private opinion, but as an ecumenical act aimed at "churchly consensus" and "reunion" in the Gospel.

To be sure, the later rise of Enlightenment ideology clouded us into thinking that the enduring contribution of the Reformation was all about the right to private opinion in matters of conscience. And unfortunately, we can still see that interpretation of the Reformation shaping the two most recent films on the subject: both Rick Steve's *Luther and the Reformation* and the upcoming PBS documentary "*Martin Luther: The Idea That Changed the World*." (Perhaps more on this another time.) This is not to say that the political (First Amendment) right to private (meaning, free from governmental interference) opinion in matters of Religion/Conscience is not an important political "spinoff" consistent with Reformation thought. Indeed, we see its seeds already in Luther's treatise, *On Secular*

Authority: To What Extent It Should Be Obeyed, where he begins to set forth his two kingdoms teaching on the relationship of Spiritual and Secular Authority. But that is not the “Big Idea” of the Reformation. The Big Idea of the Reformation is not private opinion in matters of religion and conscience, but churchly consensus that we are reconciled to God and one another through the forgiveness of sins, the daily dying and rising with Christ. That’s why preaching is ecumenical.

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## Reading the Hurricanes

Colleagues,

As it happens, I write this on Saturday, September 9. The first thing I saw on the *New York Times* website this morning were updates on Hurricane Irma. Photos hinted at horrors endured already on Caribbean islands. A graphic foretold of horrors to come along Florida’s Gulf Coast. I am sinfully glad right now that I live in Cleveland, Ohio.

Such a time these recent weeks have been. Since when do four feet of rain descend at once from the clouds above? Yet that’s what happened in Southeast Texas. Not that anyone who isn’t a Texan is still bothering to recall this, cameras and eyes having swiveled to Irma. Even further from the notice of the general public are fires raging so fiercely in Montana that the smoke is reaching Denver. And in Mexico a monumental earthquake; in South Asia the worst monsoon floods in a decade, with 1400 dead and vastly more staring at famine.

It's hard to resist the thought that Someone Somewhere is mightily upset. Even the *Times*, that arbiter of all things sensible, succumbed to this inclination when it wrote two days ago of one island or another feeling Irma's "wrath." I'm sure an editor, if quizzed about it, would try to excuse this as mere literary convention. I would demur. I think that even the smart, the savvy, and the thoroughly secular are haunted by the premonition that something so inimical to human fortunes as a Category 5 hurricane expresses anger. Not that any of them are willing any longer to explore that.

Enter the professional God-talkers, the folks who manage every time disaster strikes to open mouth and insert foot. They do so as most things are done in America these days from two opposing fronts, each sniffing its disdain at the other, each presuming to defend the Almighty's reputation, each proving itself an embarrassment to the God we know in Christ.

Here I point you to an item that one of my Facebook connections posted today. The author is a prolific blogger named John Pavlovitz, of whom I know nothing apart from his self-description as "a 20-year ministry veteran trying to figure out how to love people well and to live-out the red letters of Jesus," whatever that means. If the frequency with which his stuff shows up in my Facebook feed is any indication, the man has a following. He leans left.

In today's effort Pavlovitz takes a swing at the likes of Kirk Cameron, Joel Osteen, and their tutor in folly, Pat Robertson, for saying stupid things about God and the hurricanes. I won't trouble you with the details. [You can read for yourself.](#) Suffice it to say that I resonate to much of his complaint.

Not all of it, though. If loudmouths on the "evangelical" right say far more about the mind of God than anyone save a charlatan

would dare, than Pavlovitz says too little. I'm familiar with this move. It's common to the left-of-center ministerium I belong to in the ELCA. God is good, the theory goes. If evil erupts, then God can't, by definition, be implicated in it.

Israel's prophets would find this bemusing. So would the all but secular Abraham Lincoln who knew his Bible better than lots of today's pastors. Schooled by the prophets, the president dared to imagine the hand of God at work in the horrors of the Civil War. He did so carefully, judiciously, with a humility at once tentative and profound. See in particular his [Second Inaugural Address](#). Wars are one thing, of course; eruptions of nature are another. That doesn't stop Joel from seeing God's agency in the onset of a locust plague. "The LORD utters his voice at the head of his army; how vast is his host" (2:11). What separates Joel from today's fakers is a refusal to pin blame for the disaster—and lest we forget, locust swarms were and are disasters for communities of subsistence farmers—on a subset of resident sinners. Instead he calls on the whole land to "Return to the LORD your God; for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and"—this is missing from the Lenten refrain lots of us know—"relents from punishing" (2:13).

I should think Pavlovitz loathes the prophet Joel. If I parse him rightly, he'd argue that talk like Joel's does nothing in today's America except to magnify unbelief and feed ammunition to the scoffers. I'll guess too that he simply doesn't buy Joel's vision of what God is capable of. I wish I could ask him about this. I'd push him on where he stands with Hosea, Amos, and Micah, with Isaiah and Jeremiah. After that I'd want to ask him what Christ was for.

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This, of course, is my base complaint with both standard sides of our latter-day argument about God and nasty nature. Neither thinks to mention Christ, let alone to use him.

I say “of course” on the assumption that others in our wee Crossings community are way ahead of me in shouting the complaint at ears that will not listen.

Protestant America is addicted to generic God-talk. The god they seem to talk about the most is a construct not so much of prophets and apostles as of philosophers. This is the Glory-God, apprehended by contemplation of his attributes: omniscience, omnipotence, omnipresence. Now and then righteousness pokes its nose in via all that talk about God being good. Too many, especially on the left, succumb to the silly notion that “good” equates with “safe.” How can it, when the object of its energy is someone bad like me?

Prophets and apostle speak by contrast of a God faithful to his promises. Yes, he flashes all that glory the philosophers extol. What makes him safe—the God we can trust, in whom we find our refuge, as Israel’s poets liked to say—is his fierce determination to hang on to us when his glory lays us low.

Enter that second and subsequent glory of God in the flesh of Christ crucified. This is the One people wearing a Christian label need to be talking about in dreadful days of fire and earthquake, flood and storm. If only they would. If only they’d stop yammering about what God will or won’t be up to in the meeting between Irma and Tampa, or between Harvey and Houston before that. They don’t know. They’re only guessing. The ones who yell that God is doing nothing are faking it as badly as the other crowd, the ones asserting that God is expressing Godself in yea and such a way. To the likes of Pavolitz I say: is it really unreasonable to imagine that a God who cares profoundly

about sinners would allow a storm to knock some stuffing from a proud and haughty nation? And when they spit at me, I'll say, "Time out. Let's all stop guessing. Let's speak instead of what we know. Let's tell of Christ."

Here at last is useful talk. It centers on the person swallowed up in two competing storms, each so fierce as to make Irma appear as a passing spring shower. On the one hand is every sinner's anger at God, whether open or latent, all of it focused and directed at Jesus. On the other is God's fierce disappointment with every sinner, this too aimed squarely at Jesus. ("My God, why have you forsaken me?") He dies. How could he not? After that, the great astonishment of Easter as the earth spits him out to God's delight and our present hope and comfort. Come what may, there is nothing so terrible that it will keep God from including us in the future that Christ now owns and governs with every one of us in mind.

That's one of way of putting it, at any rate. Were the night not so deep by now and the mind so cloudy, I'd put it better, and you could too. The point is that Christ is and was and always will be the one and only sufficient reason for counting on God, and for doing this especially when the storm hits, or the earth shakes, or the cancer erupts, or when anything else comes crashing in with intimations that The One In Charge is out to get us. To argue over that, whether for or against, is a silly waste of time. What needs to be said, not once but again and again, is that God, faithful to his promises, has worked through Christ to get his gracious grasp on us already. He will never let go. After which one adds, "Let's trust that!"

By the way, that's more or less what Peter says in his first Pentecost sermon. I find it suddenly intriguing that he draws his text for that from Joel.

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For all who suffer in these days, *Kyrie eleison*.

Jerry Burce

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# Why Jesus? A Preacher's Mission-Minded Reflections

Colleagues,

Thursday Theology went quiet this Easter season. The undersigned, responsible for pushing it out, spent one of the seven weeks in Israel, and the other six sidelined by a weird combination of unusual busyness in the job that pays and a bout of mental torpor. Finally Pentecost blew in, dislodging some cobwebs. Or so I hope.

The Gospel text for most of us this coming Sunday is the final scene in Matthew. The eleven meet Jesus on an unidentified Galilean hilltop. He dispatches them to “the nations” to “make disciples.” Those with ears to hear this Sunday will understand that they too are under orders.

This drives the question that Pr. Timothy Hoyer tackles in today's offering, and as much for himself as for the rest of us. What do you say to the denizens of those nations when they ask why on earth they'd want to hook up with Jesus? Or if, these days, they're unhooking from him as they drift into secularity, what might give them pause?

Thoughtful preachers wrestle somehow with this question most

every Sunday. Thoughtful lay folk do as well when they pray for children who are giving up on church, and wonder what they'd say in the conversations they'd like to have about this but are chary of starting lest they drive the child away that much faster.

You'll notice that Pr. Hoyer begins by inviting peer review. We are all his peers in our Lord's "great commission," as we call it. Whether ordained or lay, don't hesitate to respond.

It's been a while since Tim's work last appeared in Thursday Theology, so I tack on the note that he continues to serve as pastor at Gloria Dei Lutheran Church in Lakewood, New York, on gorgeous Lake Chautauqua.

Peace and Joy,

Jerry Burce

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## **Why Do We Need Jesus?**

by Timothy J. Hoyer

To get people to need Jesus is always a preaching challenge. Here are some of my ideas, written now to help me put thoughts together, and for peer review.

1. The reason we need a crucified Jesus is because Jesus was crucified. If God gave him to us to die for us, then surely we do need Jesus, else we call God a liar.
2. Do you, the listener, like living by the law?
  - a. Life is full of constant demands, even the demands to eat and drink to stay alive. There is even the demand to stay alive. Do you like living by constant demands? For some, those demands are a wearisome

burden.

- b. Life is full of people making comments about each other. What makes people do that? What makes people make comments about others without even wondering why they do it? How do you like having people make comments about you? For some, such comments are so mean, so demeaning, that they commit suicide to escape them. Do not take lightly the comments you make.
- c. People yell at others who make mistakes. They condemn them, tell them they are useless and to go away. Do you like living where people believe (yes, this is to have trust in yelling) yelling is the way to deal with mistakes?
- d. People yell at those who hurt them emotionally or physically. People condemn others for what they did. Do you like living where people trust in yelling or are taught that yelling is the way to deal with being hurt?
- e. People condemn others. They judge them as worth little or nothing. We condemn the poor, we condemn people of color, we condemn immigrants...We condemn any who are different than we are. Do you like being condemned? Have you ever ben condemned?
- f. Whenever something comes to an end, like a movie, a TV show, a meal, the day, we always have to say something about what just ended. "Oh, that was a good movie." "That was a boring episode." "This meal was delicious!" "Today was a good day because..." "Today was terrible because..." When something ends, we must judge it. We judge it to give it meaning or purpose. It has to be good or bad, because if we don't give it meaning—its goodness or badness—then it has no purpose for us. One does not hammer nails

into the living room coffee table and when asked why simply say, "Oh, no reason." To have no reason is upsetting. It cannot be understood. It is why three year olds continually ask, "Why?" Do you like living where everything you do has to be judged, including not only everything you do, but you yourself?

- g. People talk of needing to find themselves, or that they have to find a purpose in life. No direction is given, but we do have to have a reason for why we do things, and a reason that is more than "get a good education so you can get a good job so the rich can make money off of you." This demand to have a reason is the working of the law.
- h. We may be told what to do, what needs to be done, what is required, but being told does not give us the strength, the will, the desire, the time, to do what is demanded of us.
- i. Why is it that we define a "good day" by how much we get done? Why is it that if we don't do anything we say the day has been wasted? Do you like living where we trust how much we do as the judge of how good our day is, and by implication, how good we are?
- j. We are judged as good only by what we do. Most of the time we like that, trust it. Yes, always this is a matter of faith. But if we judge ourselves by the good we do, we must also be judged by the bad we do. How do you like them apples?
- k. When we do something wrong, we feel that we have to make up for what we did. We said something insulting to a loved one and hurt their feelings. So we buy flowers to make up for what we did, or we take them out for dinner. The person hurt now has the power of judgment, to demand how much we have to do to make

up for what we did. And that can never end. Do you like that feeling of having to make up for what you did? How do we make up for saying God is not God?

3. Death is a form of condemnation. Notice that when someone dies we do not simply say that they died and stop there. No, we have to say something, pronounce a judgment on that person. "Don't speak ill of the dead." Why? Is it because only if the judgment on the dead person is that they were a good person that they get to go to heaven? Where does that idea come from? It's an idea that does not use Jesus.
4. Life is full of events. We react to events, talk about events, and they can change our lives, as when a parent of a child killed by a drunk driver works to form support groups or petition to have a law passed against drunk driving. So why do those daily events have more force in our lives than the event of Jesus' death and resurrection? Moreover, the event of judgment happens. We also have the event of forgiveness. Both speak their words to us. Which do we trust? It is a matter of faith.
5. From *The Promising Tradition*, in a story by Walter Bouman about a ride in a taxi, where the minister asks the cab driver, "What is so important to you that you would die for it?" Minister's comment to driver's response: "No, not bowling, okay, yes, your kids. Your kids are what say YES to you. But you worry because they will be drafted. This YES is not dependable. I know a YES that is dependable."
6. From Luther's *Large Catechism*, First Commandment, working from his definition of a god as that on which you depend for protection and care.
  - a. So what makes your life feel good? What do you depend on that will get you to say one day, "I have lived a good life?" Notice that whatever you depend on for that goodness does nothing to stop judgment of you, and it does nothing to overcome death.

- b. What makes your life feel like it's not so good, or that it could be better? We fear those things, and when fear grips our heart, that is our god. What grips our heart—fear, love, trust, hope—that is our god.
  - c. People's hearts are gripped by sports, by winning, by entertainment (to keep us distracted from the economic system that creates inequality of income and wealth).
- 7. Our poets—we might call them screenwriters—make comments about the idea of “god.” Captain Picard from *Star Trek: The Next Generation* states that his human culture has grown past the need for god to explain why things happen. Science does that for them. The movie *Angels and Demons* also has the fear of science replacing God. But they are both wrong, because law, judgment, purpose in life, meaning in life, and death still exist. It is those things that Jesus deals with.
- 8. We treat this earthly life as all there is and as what is most important. We have to get things done now. We have to do as much as we can. We have “bucket lists.” Some want to travel. Some want to watch their grandkids play soccer. We do all we can to make this earthly life feel good. But at the same time, we pay no attention to the fact (law) that everything in this life is temporary (though we treat things as if they will always be there); we treat this life as the one that counts, that needs our attention, that is our only concern. We will ask, “How are you?” We will be concerned about sickness, addiction, relationship challenges, but we do not ask, “How is your faith in Jesus? How is your peace in Jesus? How is your conscience?” We also have life in Jesus, in mercy, in forgiveness, in sharing the love he gives us, in our hope for eternal life with Jesus and his Father forever. We

have Jesus' promise to resurrect us. So life is not just what we see (and trust), but life, what we get to do, is in Jesus. So we can also act by faith in Christ and have our focus on living with mercy instead of judgment, forgiveness instead of condemnation, with willingness to lose this life (the time and effort to serve others at the moment of their asking for help) and not worry about not being able to do what we want. (We're all still working on this one.)

9. People have a need to declare they have lived a good life. Death demands it. The law demands it. Some determine that they have not lived a good life, either due to hardship, bad relationships, or addiction or crime. To both verdicts we hear that Peter spoke to the people, "Jesus commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that Jesus is the one ordained by God to be the judge of the living and the dead." Therefore, our judgments do not count. Our judgments about our lives, saying we have lived a good life, do not count. I am not my own judge. Our judgments about the worth of others do not count. We are not the judges of others. Jesus is because he rose from the dead. And his way of judging is to declare all people are good to God. The "all" makes full use of his death and rising, so that not some of it is used for just some people. Also, "all" includes us, me, so I am comforted that Jesus is for me. If Jesus was just for some people, certain kinds of people, good people, I would never be sure it was for me.

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When we diagnose how people need Christ, the need must be universal. "What is true for one Christian must be true for all Christians of all times." –Werner Elert

TJH

Lakewood, NY

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# **Easter Mission in 2017 (A Homily by Martin Lohrmann)**

Colleagues,

This Sunday, the Second of Easter, we hear the first conclusion of St. John's Gospel in the unabashed confession of Thomas: "My Lord and my God!" This strikes as an excellent time to pass along a contribution I got in late January from Martin Lohrmann, who teaches Reformation history and theology at Wartburg Seminary. Martin recently served a term on the Crossing Board of Directors. He sent the homily he delivered on January 18 at the seminary's Wednesday Eucharist. The church's calendar sets that day aside to remember the Confession of St. Peter. One of the texts appointed for the day, Acts 4:8-13, is also a classic Easter season text, reverberating with the joy and grit that Thomas erupts with. Here's how Martin underscored that for his students and colleagues, and now for you.

Peace and Joy,

Jerry Burce

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**A Homily on the Confession of Peter**

Texts: Acts 4:8-13 & Matthew 16:13-19

by Martin Lohrmann, Ph.D.

## Wartburg Seminary

Dubuque, Iowa

In the name of Christ our Lord. Amen

In the first chapter of Acts, the crucified and risen Christ spent forty days with the disciples before ascending into heaven and vanishing from their sight. Death could not hold him, but apparently heaven would. In that way, Jesus' ascension might have seemed like a mixed blessing: he was victorious over death, but it doesn't seem like he's here among us any longer, either.

Both the crucifixion and ascension can seem to have left abiding absences. But Jesus was not remotely finished with his followers or with the world. Through the Holy Spirit, the disciples themselves brought Jesus' holy grace, truth, healing and resurrection to this broken creation. They started in Jerusalem, a capital city well acquainted with mock justice, mob violence and cynical power plays. The disciples then went to Samaria, heartland of the culturally and spiritually impure. Then they went out to all the lost, forgotten, conquered and conquering peoples of this earth to share Christ's truth and life. Jesus was not remotely absent. Death could not hold him. Heaven does not hide him away from us, either. Crucified, risen, ascended: he is God with us still.

In the power of the Holy Spirit, Peter and John kept on doing what Jesus taught them to do. They kept being the people Jesus freed them to be. They taught spiritually hungry crowds, they gave the good news of resurrection in Christ to jaded souls, and they cared for sick and forgotten people. And they had a great time doing it: the gospel really is good news! By Acts chapter 4, these kind deeds and good tidings of great joy got them arrested for the first time.

In their trial, Peter and John talked with confidence about this good news for all people: Jesus Christ changes lives. When the ruler and elders heard this, what really astounded them was not the miraculous healing or heavenly message. It was the fact that ordinary people were doing the things of God. If ordinary people are doing holy things, then there's no stopping it. As the text says, "Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John and realized that they were uneducated and ordinary men, they were amazed and recognized them as companions of Jesus" (Acts 4:13). That's what Jesus did then and what he does now: he brings the great things of God to ordinary lives. And this is unstoppable.

In the power of the Holy Spirit, we get to be part of this gospel. We receive this new life of grace and truth and apply it to ourselves. We share the power of Christ when we care for sick and forgotten people, because Jesus came not for those who are well (or who think they are well) but for those who need help. We share this good news when we teach that God desires mercy, not sacrifice. These days—with Christ—we get to be people of truth and love in an openly post-truth culture where love mostly means self-satisfaction. In such a world, Jesus frees us to care, serve, listen, share, receive and enjoy life as ordinary broken people blessed to see and experience holiness everywhere. This is gospel truth; it is a Way of Life with a capital W and capital L. It is the wonderful Way of Jesus Christ.

Christ's power and goodness are ours simply by trusting him, by receiving him through faith alone. Faith means knowing in our hearts, bearing in our bodies, breathing with our breath that Jesus Christ is Lord. With Peter we confess: "You are the messiah, the Son of the living God." We reclaim this confession ourselves today and every day as the foundation for life that neither death, nor the gates of hell, nor even our own cynicism can shake.

What does this confession of faith look like in practice? I ask this because anyone can say that they are taking a stand for faith or truth. It's an easy thing to say and belief about one's own perspective. And then there's the question of whether we can even know what is true and good. "What is truth, anyways?" asked Pontius Pilate as he sanctioned the execution of the holy one of God. How do we know which confessional stands or prophetic stances are gospel truth?

Faced with such real questions, the Spirit has not left us empty. First, we notice that in Acts 4 Peter and John weren't speaking abstractly about God, truth or goodness when they got arrested. They were simply doing what Jesus' people always do: worshiping God, talking with people about God's grace in Christ, and caring for the sick. These holy things don't change. The gospel isn't abstract. It's something to be experienced, lived and shared. So that's one way we know gospel truth is we ourselves have received this good news and can talk about the difference it makes.

Second, when it comes to faithful stands and prophetic speech, the cross remains our guide. We can ask: do our words point people to a self-emptying Lord, who desires mercy not sacrifice for this broken world, who came to find the lost, save sinners, and give godliness to the ungodly? If so, then we're on the right road. And we can ask: do our lives have their starting point in the foundational trust that God is at work to save, heal and redeem, even when such healing and salvation seems impossibly far away? We know our Lord through the cross. To this end, we pray for the Holy Spirit to guide us in the life-giving way of the cross one day at a time.

Jesus Christ is life and truth. Death could not hold him and heaven does not hide him away from us. Crucified, risen, and ascended: Jesus Christ is God with us still, bringing the great

things of God to ordinary people. Amen

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# **Caveat Caesar, Emerging from the Shadows, and Other Thoughts for Easter**

Colleagues,

I dare this week to pass along some notions I threw together eighteen years ago, A.D. 1999, about the texts we'll be listening to again this coming Easter Sunday. I shared them that year with a text study group. I unearthed them this morning, quite by accident, for today's version of the same group. On scanning them it crossed my mind to share them here. Dated though they be—I haven't troubled to correct that, a bit of light editing notwithstanding—there's still a chance that something said below will help to underscore why the resurrection of Christ continues as unthinkably good news for the world of 2017.

Appended at the bottom are a couple of quick ideas for people who will be preaching or listening in churches on Palm Sunday and Good Friday.

Peace and Joy,

Jerry Burce

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**Monday, 3/15/99, i.e. the Ides of March**

***Caveat Caesar. Christus Regnat.***

To: Study Group Colleagues

Fr: Burce

Re: Easter Texts, Matt. 28:1-10 and John 20:1-18 (Year A, Revised Common Lectionary). Random jottings as the day unfolds.

9:05 a.m.—See the dateline above. One of the points of Matthew's Easter account, surely, is that Caesar's power (as in soldiers guarding the tomb) gives way to Christ's as butter to a hot knife. I know, I know, the soldiers are in the scene to make the point that the body wasn't stolen, and not for the sake of grinding an early Christian axe about the Roman imperium and its pretensions. Still, one can't help but assume that the faithful who cowered in catacombs at the 2<sup>nd</sup> century's turn drew the obvious promissory conclusions about Caesar's ineffectiveness at keeping *them* buried. Are there any among those we're preaching to who feel buried by Caesar as the millennium turns? If so—see possible leads in Harvey Cox's "[The Market as God](#)" in the March [1999] issue of *The Atlantic Monthly*—then this is good news indeed for them.

9:25 a.m.—Cut to John. As I got ready for yesterday's preaching (Jn. 9, the blind guy, remember?) it hit me that there's a parallel between reactions to the guy post-healing and to Jesus post-resurrection. See 9:8-10, where "neighbors and those who had seen him as a beggar" get tangled in a debate as to whether this new "seeing guy" is or is not the former blind guy. Apparently some are hard to convince, as the tense of the verb in 9c suggests: "He *kept saying*, 'I am the man.'" (Tangent: might there be a connection between "I am the man" here and "Behold the man" in ch. 19?) Though it seems that his much protesting merely aggravates the skeptics, v10: "They *kept*

asking him 'Then how were your eyes opened?'" Note, then, the parallels. a) The consistent failure, ch. 20, of the first witnesses—Mary Magdalene, then the huddled ten, then the late-coming Thomas—to make the connection between the One they now behold with the one they saw being killed on Friday past. For one and all the penny drops only when Jesus himself makes it drop (thus also Luke, first with the Emmaus Two, 24:31, then with the eleven, 24:38-43). b) The unrelenting stubbornness of the skeptics, manifested (for example) in our own day by those who insist on that hideous wall of ontological separation between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith ("They kept asking him, 'Then how were you raised from the dead?'"")

11:28 a.m.—The parallels noted above got me thinking about the mud on the blind guy's eyes. It seemed suggestive to me of two things: a) God playing in the mud as he formed the man from the dust of the ground, Gen. 2. (Here then is the Son of God re-creating; cf. Paul, 'if anyone is in Christ, bingo, new creation!') b) The moment to come, first for Jesus, then the man, when it's not just dirt over the dead, cold eyes but dirt over the whole dead, cold corpse. And then what happens? *Mirabile dictu*—incredibly, in the strict sense of the word—baptized eyes see, baptized corpses live, and in both cases as never before.

11:46 a.m.—Which means, among other things, that John leaves us no choice except to preach the resurrection in the richest, most robust and realistic sense of the Dead One Raised.

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*Continuing, 14 days later—Monday in Holy Week, to be precise:*

1. The penny dropped this morning. I now know that I will preach on the John text, along lines suggested above and sketched below.

2. For those of you preaching on Matthew, a late suggestion: the Matthean detail of guards at the tomb kicks open the door for reflection—no, that's too mild; how about jubilant proclamation?—on the fate of bullies in light of the resurrection. The bullies abound: corporate, bureaucratic, legal, political, economic, military; intellectual, artistic, athletic, ecclesiastical, intra-familial, etc. *ad nauseum*. All do what the lout on the playground does to Scrawny Little Four-eyes, or what the soldiers standing guard will surely do to the women when they approach the Lord's tomb for their final respects, i.e. they will mock them, taunt them, diminish them, harass them, squeeze another pint or two of life from their sagging spirits, and laugh with malicious glee as they do it; which is also to say that they will do to the women, though on a smaller scale, as they did to the women's Lord on the Friday previous. Ah, but now is Easter, and Christ is risen indeed! So much for the best-laid plans of said soldiers and all other would-be *Übermenschen*. See the promise of Matt. 5: "The meek shall inherit the earth." Good news indeed for so many of those to whom we preach. Even better news when one considers that the Easter Gospel contains the promise of bullies themselves being redeemed from the bullying spirit that holds them in its enslaving grip. Note, for example, what will become of the bully Saul [of Tarsus]. As we'll hear him say in Easter's second lesson: "You (I) have died, and your (my) life is hid with Christ in God" (Col. 2).
3. Regarding John: I plan to go to work on the detail of Jesus Unrecognized. This, of course, is a persistent motif in the Easter accounts, not only here with Mary Magdalene, but also on Easter Evening with the ten (Jn .20) and the Emmaus 2 (Lk. 24), also on the shore of the Sea of

Galilee, Jn. 21 and with the eleven on the Galilean hill, Mt. 28:17 (“they fell down and worshipped him; *but somedoubted*). Two things are asserted by these accounts: a) Jesus who was Crucified (and none other) is alive; the One now seen by apostolic witnesses is ontologically identical to the one whom they also saw “breathing his last.” b) The same Jesus he may be, but there’s also something so different about him that those who see him now can’t—on their own—make the connection to the one they’d just seen.

4. Images and phrases leap to mind. Who of us, as children, were able to make an unassisted connection between the grandparents we knew and the figures who appeared in that ancient, dusty wedding-day photograph? Again: one speaks of athletes—Muhammad Ali comes to mind—who are “shadows of their former selves.” Dare we apply this frame of reference to Jesus, understanding that resurrection has turned him into a shadow of *his* former self, only in reverse? Thus C. S. Lewis, especially in his Narnia books, where the reality now known is but a shadow of the things to come (though whether he’s indebted in this more to Plato than to Paul—cf. Col. 2:17—I’m not prepared to say).
5. Theologically understood, the shadowing of the former self is a sign of divine judgment. Since Christ’s resurrection constitutes a reversal of that judgment, it follows that the shadowing itself is likewise reversed.
6. The apostolic witnesses are unanimous in their assessment of that resurrection’s significance *for us*. What God accomplished in Christ, he intends to accomplish also in those who are bound to Christ through faith. Again the second lesson: “Our lives are hid with Christ; when Christ who is our life appears, we also appear with him in glory,” i.e. un-shadowed. Note how Peter’s assessment of Easter’s import in his preaching to Cornelius and company

(First Lesson, Acts 10:34ff.) focuses on Christ's present role as "judge of the living and the dead." Good news this is: the Judge, capital J, is the Forgiver of Sins, i.e. the Reverser of Prior Judgment, i.e. the Un-Shadower—putting flesh on dry bones (cf. Ezekiel 37, Lent 5) and choosing What is Not to bring to nothing (to overshadow?) That Which Is, 1 Cor. 1:28.

7. Thus some likely pieces of the proclamation from Messiah's pulpit on Sunday morning:

"Brothers and sisters, it's already Easter, and wasn't it only last night that we gathered in this place to celebrate Christmas Eve? How the days, the weeks, the months have sped by. And for the over-the-hill gang—all of us who are 40 or older—we see how the years are sprouting wings. We look from mirror to scrapbook—that dusty, buried scrapbook, where the old photographs reside, the ones that make the grandkids ooh and ahh and sometimes giggle—and we see clearly how we're becoming shadows of our former selves. But thanks to Jesus Christ our Lord, what God would have us hear this morning is that we are all of us—old *and* young alike—shadows in truth, but shadows of our *future* selves. This indeed is the power and promise of Easter *for us*: that in Jesus Christ, for our sakes crucified and now raised, the direction of history (our own *and* the world's) has been thrown in reverse; so that instead of moving, as we seem to be, from present light to future darkness—the shadows increasing with every new wrinkle and every fresh sin—we are to be taken instead from present darkness to future light; to a Goodness, a Beauty, a Love, a Joy, of which the best and finest that we now know is but the palest imitation. And we ourselves shall be so changed by God's mercy that those who know us now at our present best will be hard pressed to make the link between the persons we are and the persons we will be, so much better and finer will God have made us.

"We find this promise in the person of Christ—the firstborn of the dead, as one of the apostolic witnesses call him. Mary got to know him when he was busy "bearing our sins" as we often hear it said. Then his shoulders were stooping beneath the weight of the responsibility he had assumed for who and what we are. Maybe the reason she doesn't recognize him this morning is that those shoulders of his are now straight. The burden has been borne. His responsibilities for us have been attended to, to the Father's satisfaction. Now he stands tall, and in that standing tall is the promise that we who are his by faith will one day be standing straight as well. Not merely before each other or before the world, mind you, but—much more to the point—before God.

"Of course the temptation is to think that all this is so much a matter of the future that we won't see it happen till "we get to heaven," as we also like to say. But resist the temptation. God's re-creating of us—his raising of us to new life—is a project that God is embarking on already now. Think for example of people you've heard about: Peter the Craven Denier become Peter the Fearless Pentecost Preacher. Saul the Pharisee with murder in his heart becomes Paul the Apostle. Augustine, the young, promiscuous wastrel, become Augustine, Doctor of the Church. John Newton, slave transporter, becomes John Newton, English abolitionist and author of "Amazing Grace." Charles Colson, political hatchet man, becomes Charles Colson, servant to the Christ he encounters in the persons of convicted, incarcerated criminals. And a little girl from the back hills of Croatia turns into Mother Theresa. Come to think of it, maybe you haven't only heard of such people. Maybe you yourself have also seen one. For all I know, you *are* one.

"As we prepare for the Eucharist this morning the consecrating prayer the pastor prays will contain the phrase, 'We cry out

for the resurrection of our lives' (2<sup>nd</sup> option, *Ministers' Desk Edition, Lutheran Book of Worship*). We cry for this because God has promised it. For some of us he'd like to get the project rolling ASAP. For others—many more of us, I think—he'd simply like to pick up where the Spirit of Christ left off the last time we sat here being exposed to the Word of God and nourished with the Blessed Sacrament. Consider this: God's goal and intention, also with you, is to turn you into one of those Peter/Paul/Augustine/Theresa-ish types who help others to see that, in Christ, the temporal relation between shadow and reality has been reversed.

"Or putting that same thought into more down-to-earth terms: you've heard it said that 'you can't teach an old dog new tricks,' and that's correct: *You* can't. But God can. And God will. That's what Jesus died for, the right to make old dogs do new things they've never done before, Easter means this, that the right he died to earn was granted to him. Please expect him then—this living Lord of ours—to seize hold of your lives and make of them what they weren't and couldn't be before. And please—above all else—trust him enough to let him do it.

"Above all else, remember that trusting Jesus involves telling the truth about the present lives we're so enamored with. 'Don't cling to me,' says Jesus to Mary when the penny drops at last and she understands who he is. Daughter of a dying world that she is, Mary still takes it for granted—as do I, as do you—that all good things inevitably must end, whether suddenly or in a long, sad slide from better to worse, from livelier to deadlier. Therefore one grabs for the gusto as it shoots on by because gusto gone is gone for good—se we believe. In Mary's mind is the memory, still fresh, of life at its best, which for her was life in Jesus' company in those

heady pre-crucifixion days when he drove out the demons of fear and loneliness and bitter self-loathing, and in their place he blessed her with first-ever inklings of what hope and love and joy are really all about. Torn from her, he was. And if, by virtue of one of these freak glitches in the inexorable grinding of fate she should find the lost joy momentarily restored—well, thinks she, I’m going to hang on to it for all I’m worth. ‘Let go,’ Jesus says. ‘By far the best is yet to come; and even the best of the joys you have known with me is but a pale shadow of the Joy to come. I go to the Father to make it so.’ How much more does this same Lord Jesus invite and command us to let loose of the lesser joys—in some cases the tawdry and selfish pleasures—to which we cling; to give our hearts instead to Him, to the future he promises, to the hope he excites: and in that giving, to spend our lives freely on the spreading of that hope.

“Can you imagine a congregation, a community, a world, in which everyone lived in this hope? Do you understand how important it is that there be some—at least a few—who live with fierce determination as shadows of their future selves in Jesus Christ their Lord? Christ is risen indeed. Go in peace, in hope, and serve him!”

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“Hey Burce, enough already!” —Thanks, colleagues, for your patience. What will become of the above ramblings I know not yet. *Veni creator Spiritus*. Amen. To each and all of you, a blessed proclaiming, an Exuberant Easter.

JEB. March 1999

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**Addendum: Two Notes on the Passion Accounts this Year**

Like others of you I'm facing two Passion homilies, one on Matthew's account for Palm Sunday, the other on John's account for Good Friday. Here is one idea for each that I'm toying with at the moment as the driver for a longer reflection. I have attended to neither in 30 plus year of prior Passion preaching, and it's way past time to fix that:

From Matthew, the infamous line that blind and wicked Christians have historically seized on to excuse doing evil to Jews: "His blood be on us, and on our children" (27:25). In a note I was copied on a few days ago, Ed Schroeder cites Fred Niedner as source for the following:

"[This is a] parallel to the blood on the doorposts at the first Passover in Egypt. Namely, when you have the passover-lamb-blood marking you, you get rescued. Could Matthew, who is full of Old Testament parallels throughout his twenty-eight chapters, be telling hi readers about this 'ironic' request to have '*his* blood be on *us* and our kids'? Asking to have *this* blood on you is not asking for a curse, but a request for redemption from the curse."

And from John, the famous line, declaimed by Pilate as he trots Jesus before the crowd: "Behold the man!" (19:5). But as Steve Turnbull reminded us in his superb essay at the 2016 Crossings Conference, it's not "behold the man," but "behold the *anthropos*," i.e. the human being. One of John's great concerns, throughout his Gospel, is to address two questions: what is humanity, and what does God intend that humanity should be? Both questions get answered definitively in that picture of Jesus crowned in thorns, standing before the mob—the human being simultaneously at its most destitute and most glorious. Here is what "rehumanized" humans will look like today when God has had God's way with them. But for more on this, see [Steve's essay](#). I touted it in the lead up to Holy Week last year. I do so again.

# The Eerie Wonder of Tennessee Jack Daniels

Colleagues,

Two Sundays ago St. John's account of Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus was read in churches around the world. Many of you caught it, some for the hundredth time. So to get things started today, a quick question: to whom was Jesus referring when he spoke of the wind blowing where it pleases, of which you hear the sound, not knowing where it came from or where it's headed?

"The Holy Spirit." Is that what you just said?

Then the awful sound you're hearing now is that game-show buzzer blaring "Wrooooong!"

And if you're hearing that, please, don't be too embarrassed. The company you're keeping is great. Check with the people around you. Nine out of ten will get it wrong too. That includes a heap of pastors.

What's with the eye-to-mind connection, I wonder, that it now and then refuses to register what a line of type is aiming to transmit? I've been misreading-mis-thinking?-John 3:8 for decades. It was only this month that the eyes finally focused, and the brain as well. Did you hear the buzzer just now as I did two weeks ago? Then look yet again, and see for yourselves:

"The wind blows where it chooses.... So it is with **everyone who is**

## **born of the Spirit."**

Whom does the wind signify here? Not the Spirit. For that see Acts 2:2. In John 3:8 the spotlight rests on others, the ones "born of the Spirit." That would be Jesus in the first place. It also includes the countless others who trust him. Go figure. You who read this with a modicum of thanks to God on Christ's account are among the wind people, so to speak. You blow where you please. You make noise that others notice. Those who do notice can't for the life of them figure you out. So says your Lord, describing you.

"Oh, really?" you say, echoing me. Next question for us all, a huge one: how on earth might such things be playing out as we go about our real-time days as baptized children of God, born of water and the Spirit, as Jesus says, then loosed on the world by a weird and eerie grace of God, beyond our explication?

This, it seems to me, calls for some fresh exercising of our Christian imagination, a worthy project for Lent if ever there was one. To get us started on this, I'm pleased to pass along a recent gift from Bruce Modahl. You [last heard from him](#) in Thursday Theology in the first week of December, 2015. The piece I pass along today seems strikingly apt to the matters Jesus talks about with Nicodemus. May the sounds made by the wind-folk Bruce describes refresh your spirits too.

Peace and Joy,  
Jerry Burce

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## **Tennessee Jack Daniels Joins the Lutheran Church**

by Bruce K. Modahl

When we visited my cousin and his wife in Tennessee, I learned

Jack Daniels was a Lutheran. He joined Joyful Servants Lutheran Church in Seymour. No doubt for all eighty-four years of his life people have been saying, "What was his momma thinking when she named him Jack?" She was not thinking Tennessee whiskey. She was thinking John, the beloved disciple. In full disclosure, his name is not Jack Daniels but something like it. The church in Seymour is not Joyful Servants but close. Otherwise the story is as my cousin handed it on to me.

The Lutheran Church in Seymour has had its ups and downs. A group of people organized the congregation almost thirty years ago. They are mostly retirees from up north. They came looking for a place warmer than Michigan but not as hot as Florida. They were looking for someplace lukewarm with a good view so they settled in Seymour in the foothills of the Smoky Mountains. Dollywood is just down the road in Pigeon Forge and Gatlinburg is nearby if they need some excitement. Mostly, they do not. They grew to about two hundred people and built an attractive little church. After five years the pastor left for larger challenges and with him went the first wave of people out. They were dissatisfied over the way worship was being conducted. A new pastor came and by all accounts was doing a great job. The best way to say what happened to him was he lost his nerve. People were still fighting over which hymnal to use and what hymns to sing and on and on. Everyone said, "This is not the way we did it up north." He did not have any experience. He had no one to talk to that could help him sort out the trivia from the treasure. He lost his nerve. When he went another wave of people left.

By the time Jack Daniels found them they were down to twenty people in worship on a good Sunday. They had long since sold their church building. They are on their second storefront location. Soon it will be a third. Owners keep selling buildings out from under them. They rely on retired pastors to take turns

preaching. When they aren't available my cousin fills in though church headquarters does not like him doing that. When he has the sermon he has to call it a talk.

What attracted Jack to Joyful Servants is hard to say other than he had been in most other churches in town and wore out his welcome in one after the other. That is a lot of welcome to wear out because there are a lot of churches in this notch on the bible belt.

Jack presented himself to the people of Joyful Servants as their new evangelist. He would talk to anybody anytime about the Lord. In the grocery store he asked the lady choosing lettuce next to him if she knew Jesus as her personal Lord and Savior. He stood on the street corner in Gatlinburg and stopped tourists by posing the question, "If you died tonight would you go to heaven?"

Rather than throw away an old Bible he took it apart and carried pages with him. At the end of his witness he handed people a page saying, "Here is a gift for you, a page from the Word of God. I think you will find something helpful in its message."

Someone pointed out to him that random pages from the Bible might not be helpful. And what if you got a good story, Jesus stilling the storm, for example, and the page ended right in the middle of the story, leaving Jesus asleep in the stern of the boat and the disciples crying out in fear.

Jack could see this was a weakness in his method. So, he took to handing out pages from old hymnals. He told people, "Here is a blessing for you, a page from a hymnal. If you can't read music you can read the words. God will bless you."

Some people worried Jack's brand of evangelism would scare people off. They said, "We need to tell Jack he is not to

identify himself as being from Joyful Servants." But someone pointed out "Folks are not exactly beating the doors down to get in. Let him alone." They did. And so, they had their official evangelist, the only Lutheran evangelist working the grocery store aisles and street corners in Seymour and its environs.

Jack lived all his life in the foothills of the Smokey Mountains. All his life Jack attended churches in which people were known to encourage the preacher by calling out, "Amen, brother" or "Praise the Lord." For all the years of his life that is what Jack did when he heard the word of God preached. The people of Joyful Servants Lutheran Church had never before heard such a thing. That is not the way they did it up north. Hearing Jack call out, "Amen" and "Praise the Lord" got on peoples' nerves. People said they didn't hear a word of the sermon because they were on edge, waiting for the next "Amen," and trying to anticipate "Praise the Lord," so they wouldn't jump in their seats.

My cousin told me one retired pastor got so flustered by Jack that after the service was over he came over to Jack and shook his finger in Jack's face saying, "Now listen here. In the Lutheran Church we do not say 'Praise the Lord.'"

That moment may have been the turning point. The story made the rounds. People told and retold it and laughed over it. Jack kept coming to church; the people made room for him.

Jack was also a regular at the Wednesday night Bible study. Joyful Servants was the only church in the circuit and probably the entire district claiming 75% of its members in small group Bible study. They regularly had fifteen show up at 7:30 on a Wednesday night. Jack added in his "Amen" and "Praise the Lord" at this gathering as well. On the rare occasions Jack missed Bible study my cousin placed in the center of the table a

battery-powered button he found in a catalogue. Pushing the button triggers a voice calling out, "Praise the Lord."

Jack came to church for three years before anyone saw his wife. He talked about Edna. Folks knew their children had come together to celebrate their 60<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary. After three years, she showed up at church one Sunday. She told people she came to see the people who put up with her husband. She came back the next Sunday and the Sunday after that and has kept on coming. She told one of the ladies she had not been to church in over thirty years. She said, "You want to know about being shunned, I'll tell you."

To my knowledge no one asked for the details. There is more to the story than I know. All I know is here was a wounded soul, starved for the Bread of Life.

Joyful Servants Lutheran Church might not survive. They will never build a mega-worship center, advertise on billboards leading into town, or broadcast their services on television. However, by the power at work within this stiff-necked people God accomplished something beyond our imagination.

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## **Steven Kuhl on "Reformation Spirituality" (Part Two)**

Colleagues,

A week ago I sent you the first half of a talk by Steve Kuhl on Reformation ideas about spirituality. Here is the second half. There is much of interest here, even for those of us who think

as a matter of course about the distinction between Law and Gospel. For details on where and when Steve presented this, see the introduction to last week's post.

Speaking of that introduction, it begin with some rumination on Ash Wednesday that included the following summation of what the day's sign conveys: "You are ash, nothing more. / You are Christ's, nothing less." The second line prompted Gary Simpson of Luther Seminary to send a quick one-sentence response:

"As Martin Luther notes, 'We are Christ('s), both with and without the apostrophe' [with a special thanks to Jaroslav Pelikan's brilliant translation]."

It took me ten seconds of mulling before I got the point. Most of you will get there in five, I suspect.

Peace and Joy,

Jerry Burce

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## **Reformation Protestant Approaches to Spirituality**

by Steven C. Kuhl

Part Two

### **The Spirituality of the Gospel and Luther's Evangelical Breakthrough**

15. When, in 1507, Luther confessed to Johann Staupitz that he hated God, Staupitz did two things. First, he tried to assure Luther that we are forgiven before God by virtue of the blood of Jesus, regardless of what the church taught. Second, as Luther's superior, he ordered Luther to become a Scripture scholar, so he could take over Staupitz's own

professorship at the University of Wittenberg. Evidently, deep down, Staupitz believed Luther would find the help he needed in the Bible. As one might expect, Luther poured himself into Scripture with the same intensity he devoted to his monastic commitments. But he also did so armed with the latest scholarly resources made available by a new intellectual movement called the Renaissance. Wary of the way the reigning scholastic method of studies uncritically accepted the contemporary state of affairs as a consistent development of Christian and Roman culture, the Renaissance's battle cry was "back to the sources." The presupposition was clear: "Take nothing for granted, check out the sources yourself." In theology that meant going "back to the Bible" and the patristic sources in their original languages. For Luther that meant learning classical Latin, Greek and Hebrew so he could study the Bible and the works of Augustine in their original language.

16. Luther did exactly as Staupitz commanded him and in 1512 received his doctorate and took the post of Professor of Biblical Studies at the University of Wittenberg. Then, in 1516, it happened. While studying and teaching Paul's letter to the Romans, Luther had his "Gospel Aha," his "eureka" moment, which is usually called his "evangelical breakthrough." As an old man, Luther explained how this "Aha!" happened. It came while he struggled to understand Romans 1:17, "For the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, 'The one who is righteous will live by faith.'" At issue was the concept of the "righteousness of God" as Paul uses it in this passage.
17. All of a sudden, "by the mercy of God," Luther says, he saw everything in context. He had always assumed that the term the "righteousness of God" referred to the demands of

God given in the Law for us to fulfill, that is, “an active righteousness.” And since only those who do them perfectly are right with God, the righteousness of God always spelled doom for him. But Paul was not talking about the Law here. He was talking about the Gospel “as the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith” (Rom. 1:16). He was talking about another kind of righteousness of God. Here the righteousness of God is a merciful gift that God gives, not a demand that God imposes. It is given on account of Christ, who died and rose for us and is received simply on the basis of faith, that is, by trusting the giver. Luther now came to realize that the Gospel initiated a new kind of spirituality: one that consists, not in doing of the Law, but in trusting the promise, which he summarizes as justification by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. Concerning the Gospel Luther says,

Here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through the open gates. There a totally other face of the entire Scripture showed itself to me. Thereupon I ran through the Scripture by memory. I also found in other terms an analogy, as, (1) the work of God, that is, what God does in us, (2) the power of God, with which he makes us strong, (3) the wisdom of God, with which he makes us wise, (4) the strength of God, (5) the salvation of God, (6) the glory of God... Later I read Augustine’s *The Spirit and the Letter*, where contrary to hope I found that he, too, interpreted God’s righteousness in a similar way, as the righteousness with which God clothes us when he justifies us. (*Luther Works*, vol, 34, 337.)

## **Basic Ingredients in a Lutheran Spirituality**

18. In order to see what this spirituality of the Gospel looks

like in Luther's context, one simply needs to study how Luther and his companions set out to reform—or better, reground—church teaching and practice and the Christian life in light of the Gospel “Aha.” It began on October 31, 1517 with Luther's 95 Theses, which explained why the sale of indulgences was contradictory to the Gospel, and reached its climax on June 25, 1530 with the presentation of the Augsburg Confession to Emperor Charles V. This was a comprehensive explanation of how current teaching and practice in the church could be reformed to accord with the Gospel. Following are some basic features that inform Lutheran spirituality.

19. 19. Holy God and sinful humanity are the two poles that form the ellipse of humanity's “natural” spirituality or relation to God, what I've called the spirituality of the Law. This entails a mystery that follows the plotline of Genesis 1-3. God created the world and its human caretakers to live in creative harmony with God, but humanity rebelled and usurped the prerogatives of God for itself. In response, God justly displays his anger and displeasure by imposing on humanity his Law, which functions in two ways. First, it functions “spiritually” by showing humanity the evidence of its rebellion for which it is being sentenced to death. Second, it functions “socially” by restraining or channeling human rebellion for the sake of maintaining some semblance of creativity and order in God's creation. The root of sin is therefore rebellion against God, a rebellion that reverberates throughout the whole creation. The essence of the law is God's anger rooting out sin, an anger that also reverberates throughout the whole creation.
20. Christ and faith are the two poles that form the ellipse of a spirituality of the Gospel, which, as Lutherans see it, is intended by God to replace our “natural”

spirituality, the spirituality of the Law. This also entails a mystery. The spirituality of the Law spells our doom before God, and there is nothing we can do to change that: for God is right and we are wrong. Moreover, God doesn't have to do anything to change it: for he is right and we are wrong. But even more, it would seem that God shouldn't change it, for if he did he would be contradicting what is right. Therein lies the mystery of the Gospel. In deciding to show mercy to sinners God *is* contradicting himself. But in this contradiction lies the reason for God the Father, in corroboration with God the Holy Spirit, to send God the Son, Jesus Christ, to die for us. Jesus is God battling for us against God's own legally sanctioned condemnation of us—this is the meaning of his cross. In winning that battle he wins the right for God to forgive us and to make us children of God and heirs of eternal life—this is the meaning of his resurrection. Since this is pure gift, pure promise, we benefit from it by trusting it, that is, by taking it to heart as true. That's where the Holy Spirit comes in. The Spirit's job is not only to make sure that this “good news” is published everywhere, but also that those who hear it will believe it. Faith in Christ is therefore also a gift, a gift of the Holy Spirit.

21. The Bible plays a central, authoritative role in Luther's spirituality of the Gospel, but not necessarily in the way that it does in many *sola scriptura* (“scripture alone”) theologies. For Luther, the Bible can be likened to the baby Jesus lying in the manger bed of straw. When reading the Bible it is as important for us to distinguish Law and Gospel as it was for the shepherds to distinguish the manger (consisting of wood and straw) from the baby. The main point of Scripture is to focus us on Christ and his benefits, aka, the Gospel. Lutherans, therefore, tend to

read the Bible not as an instruction book about what to do, but as a public proclamation about Christ, and as teaching examples, historical and metaphorical, of the interaction between God's two ways, Law and Gospel, in the world.

22. The sacraments are not obligations to be done, but means of grace through which God himself comes to us with his promise to forgive us and justify us for Christ's sake. As such, the only appropriate response is faith. Faith in the promise is analogous to gratitude for a gift. The gift creates/elicits/brings forth the gratitude, the gratitude does not merit the gift. Although the term "sacrament" is usually reserved for Baptism, Holy Communion, and Confession and Absolution, Luther often described five ways in which the Gospel comes to us. Besides these three he also included preaching and the mutual conversation and consolation of fellow Christians. The point of Lutheran sacramental theology is that we can know with certainty where, how, and when God is coming to us with grace. Sacraments are the antidotes to any spirituality conceived as an agnostic search for God.
23. Vocation is living by faith in God and love of neighbor in the midst of life's duties and responsibilities, challenges and opportunities, sorrows and joys, uncertainty and monotony. It means that, no matter where we are in the world, this is where God calls us to be. Central to a Lutheran spirituality, as it relates to vocation, is the one-way nature of the relationship between faith and good works. Faith produces good works, not the other way around. To the contrary, doing good works can actually strain faith. That is why regular participation in the means of grace is so important. Therefore, in this spirituality of the Gospel, faith in Christ alone defines our relationship to God. Good works

and self-discipline define our relationship to our neighbors and ourselves.

24. Prayer is a natural extension of faith and is therefore a very mundane and “non-mystical” feature of the spirituality of the Gospel. Put simply, it is a matter of depending on God for whatever concerns us. Using the Lord’s Prayer as a model, prayer can be likened to our contribution to an everyday conversation with a parent, that is, someone who is not our peer, yet whom we trust implicitly, someone whom we believe knows what we need better than we. Prayer can be formal or informal, individual or corporate, desperate or routine, clumsy or elegant. The point is that prayer is a natural feature of a trusting relationship. If prayer be likened to conversation, then it is only half, my half, of the conversation. The other half would naturally be the Word of God to me. Therefore prayer always presupposes that we take not only the stance of a speaker, but also of a listener. After all, what’s the point in asking if you’re not listening for the response?

## **Other Reformed Movements**

25. To fulfill the assignment, let me say a few, very brief, inadequate words about two other Reformation Protestant movements, Calvinism and the Anabaptists.
26. [Calvinism](#) stands very close to Lutheranism on numerous issues, especially with regard to its anti-Pelagian emphasis. And yet, there are significant differences. First, while Calvinism affirms “justification by faith alone” as a dictum, it conceives of it very differently than Luther did. This is because of Calvin’s failure to understand the fundamental difference between providence (Law) and promise (Gospel) as exhibited in his doctrines of election and double predestination. Second, while

Calvinism regards the sacraments as effective signs, the idea of the real “bodily” presence of Christ in the Eucharistic elements, so central to Luther, is replaced by the idea of a “spiritual” or “mystical” feeding by the faithful, by faith, on the ascended body of Christ located in heaven at the right hand of God. These issues are fundamentally Christological in nature and hearken back to Luther’s earlier debate with Ulrich Zwingli at Marburg. Third, the core of Calvin’s theology and spirituality is embodied in the axiom, “the chief end of man is to give glory of God.” Under that rubric, Calvin again blunts Luther’s sharp distinction between Law and Gospel, arguing that Law and Gospel are meant to complement, not contradict one another, as means to achieve that end. Finally, Calvin’s spirituality is often described as a “worldly” spirituality. For it is in the course of daily living—hard work, frugality, charitable dealings, and moral restraint—that one glorifies God and, therefore, in the fruits of daily living that one beholds the sign of one’s election.

27. Anabaptists were the most radical of the Protestant reform movements and, as a result, they faced extreme persecution from both Catholics and other Reformation Protestants. In fact, the label “Anabaptist” is a catch-all term for groups of very diverse persuasions. Nevertheless, what they tended to hold in common was a very literal reading of the Bible and a conviction that true reform of the church meant a return to the literal teachings and practices of the primitive New Testament Church. I’ll focus here primarily on the Mennonite version of the Anabaptist tradition.
28. Several beliefs and practices were central for marking Anabaptist (which means “re-baptizers”) identity and Anabaptist spirituality. The first mark was “believer’s

baptism" as opposed to infant baptism. While affirming the slogan "justification by faith," they took "faith" to mean an adult, mature, rational decision to become a follower of Jesus' way of life. Accordingly, the sacraments were not thought of as "effective signs" or means of grace, but as "ordinances" or rituals whereby a believer shows publically his or her pledge to follow Jesus. Baptism was the ordinance by which one made his/her first public profession of faith; the Lord's Supper, viewed as a memorial meal, was the ordinance for identifying those who were deemed faithful followers of Jesus Christ. Those not worthy because of public sin or offense were banned until sufficient repentance was demonstrated. The second mark was "separation from the world" as opposed to an alliance of church and state that had existed since the days of Constantine. Anabaptists did not reject the state as ordained by God to punish evildoers and maintain law and order. But they did reject the use of the power of the state to enforce religious compliance and they reserved the right not to participate in those laws set down by the state that, in their minds, violated the ethics of Christ. The third mark was martyrdom. Anabaptists were convinced that to follow Jesus faithfully could likely lead to persecution and even death. They believed this not only because that was their experience, but because it was the experience of the primitive New Testament and pre-Constantinian church. Their spirituality focused them on being prepared. In general, the spirituality of the Anabaptist tradition is one of simplicity. They did not adorn their worship with art, ritual, and ornamentation for fear it would detract them from the simple call to follow Christ alone.

29. Although my descriptions of both the Calvinist and Anabaptist traditions are meager at best, I hope that you

will have gotten some sense of what was important to them relative to Luther. There is no one Protestant Spirituality. As I end this talk I pray that what I hoped for, at the beginning of it, was realized: namely, that I did no harm, and that a little light has been shed on this important topic.

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## Steven Kuhl on “Reformation Spirituality”

Colleagues,

Ash Wednesday just happened. Attendance where I serve was stronger than I expected. Was that a response to the times we're in? I wonder. As ever on Ash Wednesday, the liturgy delivered God's response to the times we're in, or more pointedly, to people enmeshed in such times. I hope the ones who checked in managed to catch that. I tried to underscore how the sign of the ashen cross conveys it without words, this astonishing declaration, God talking from both left and right sides of God's mouth, so to speak, emphasis on the words from the right as the ones for us finally to pin our hearts on.

“You are ash, nothing more.” “You are Christ's, nothing less.”

It suddenly crosses my mind to startle people this coming Sunday, the first in Lent, by having somebody daub the ashes on my forehead again just before I step into the pulpit. I'd tell them to keep their eyes on it, remembering that anything and everything they might hear from me aims simply to explicate what the sign is saying. If I really had some nerve, I'd add that if

they hadn't heard such explication by the time I was done, they ought to look for another preacher, one who wouldn't dodge her responsibilities and waste their time.

I think this, of course, because I'm a serious Lutheran, and that's how serious Lutherans think, a point that Steven Kuhl is about to reinforce in a two-part entrée, half served up today and half next week. I pass along a talk that Steve gave four weeks ago at the [Siena Retreat Center](#) in Racine, Wisconsin. The center is owned and operated by the Racine Dominicans, a community of nuns and lay associates who continue, obviously, to take their missional cues from Dominic of Osma, the founder of the order, with honor paid also to Catherine of Siena. To brush up on their stories, see the website. (We Lutherans, so benighted where the medieval church is concerned, would do well to take some moments for that.)

Steve's assignment, handed him by a former student who now runs the Siena Center, was to introduce a largely Catholic audience to "Protestant spirituality." Now there's a wide-open topic if ever there was one. I'll leave it to you to explore what Kuhl the Lutheran did with it. No, you don't get brownie points if you guess in advance that he divided Law and Gospel; though for the Gospel side of his exposition, you'll have to wait till next week.

By the way, I failed to ask Steve if the event at the Siena Center was driven by a desire there to ponder the pending 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Reformation. I shouldn't be surprised if it was. Those Racine Dominicans are a thoughtful group; again, explore their website. Hans Küng, the heavyweight Swiss theologian, is another Catholic sibling-in-Christ who is paying close attention to the anniversary. He just weighed in, this very day, with [a call to end the Reformation schism](#). You might find that of interest too.

Peace and Joy,

Jerry Burce

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## Reformation Protestant Approaches to Spirituality

by Steven C. Kuhl

1. Let me begin by saying “thank you” to Claire Anderson and the Siena Center for inviting me here to talk about “Reformation Protestant Approaches to Spirituality” and to all of you for coming to listen and engage in discussion. As you can well guess, it is a subject that can in no way be addressed adequately in 90 minutes, so my prayer is that, at the least, I do no harm in trying to do so, and, at best, I shed a little light on this important topic.

The historic moment in which we stand deserves note: the 500<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Reformation. Of course, we are all aware of the divisions that the Reformation caused in the Western Church – not only between Protestants and Catholics, but also between Protestants. Nevertheless, in spite of those divisions, it did bring all Christians together in the common conviction that *ecclesia semper reformanda est*, “The Church must always be reformed.” The work of reform is not an alien work in the Church of Jesus Christ, but part of the integral and proper work of the Spirit, as integral and proper as confession and forgiveness is in our individual lives. This is true even when differences emerge about what reform should look like. For the words of Paul to the Corinthians stand as true not only for them, but for every age: “For there must be factions among you, for only so will it become clear who among you is genuine” (1 Corinthians 11:19). Note, Paul’s concern here is not simply to find out who is “right” but who is

“genuine,” by which he means openness to being transformed and reconciled in the truth of the gospel. Nevertheless, as we approach the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 16<sup>th</sup> Century Reformation, I think we can *genuinely* say that Catholics and Reformation Protestants are closer in their views on what reform of the church might look like than ever before in our history, thanks in large part to the dialogical spirit that has emerged among us with the ecumenical movement.

## **Two Preliminary Questions: One about Protestantism, One about Spirituality**

2. The first question to be addressed as we begin to discuss the topic of Reformation Protestant approaches to spirituality is what do we mean by Reformation Protestantism? As hinted earlier, it is important to remember that Reformation Protestantism does not refer to a single theological or spiritual tradition, but to at least four distinct interpretations of the Christian faith, typically categorized as Lutheran, Reformed, Anabaptist and Anglican. The only reason we speak of “Protestantism” as though it is a single, unified thing is because of the common focus of their “protest” against what they saw as inexcusable abuses and grave errors (errors that contradicted the spirit of Christianity itself, that is, the gospel) in the theology and practice of the medieval Roman Catholic Church of their day. Outside of this commonly held “protest” by Protestants against the institutional church of their day, they also ended up variously agreeing and disagreeing with one another on a host of issues. In other words, it was easier to find agreement in what was wrong with their Roman Catholic Church—and they all loved her as their Church—than to find agreement on how to right it.

Therefore, as we attempt to describe the various Protestant approaches to Spirituality, we will also need to attend to these various areas of agreement and disagreement between Protestants.

3. The second question to be addressed has to do with what is meant by "spirituality." In general, it is not a term that Reformation Protestants have typically used in their theological vocabulary. To illustrate the widespread cultural popularity and eclectic meaning of the term today, one simply needs to browse the section called "spirituality" in your local Barnes & Noble store. As you do you will notice two very different sources behind the meaning of the term, with one source being the Roman Catholic tradition (especially writers like Thomas Merton) and the other source being the so-called New Age Movement.
4. For Roman Catholicism the term "spirituality" is connected to its monastic religious tradition and the attempt of that tradition to break out of its monastic walls and into the sphere of the laity. This accent on a personal lay spirituality, which seeks to deepen one's relationship to God through disciplined spiritual exercise, started already in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century Reformation era. Of special note in this regard is St. Francis de Sales (1567-1622). As the reformed-minded Catholic Bishop of Geneva, he not only made the practice of spiritual direction to the laity a cornerstone of his episcopal ministry, but sought to expand that ministry to others by publishing a collection of his personal letters and notes on the practice of spiritual direction in a work called "Introduction to the Devout Life." [ref] Gordon S. Wakefield, "Francis de Sales, St." in *The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, Gordon S. Wakefield, ed. (Westminster Press: Philadelphia, 1983), pp. 158-9.[/ref] Its gentle style of spiritual exercises, compared to Ignatius' harsh

spirituality, even drew looks from many Protestants, as it focused spirituality on living a charitable life, rather than an austere one.

5. The New Age Movement tends to use the term “spirituality” to contrast itself from “religion,” the quintessential example of which is the denominational church with its defined doctrines, organizational regulations, liturgical practices, and ethical norms. Its influence today can be seen in the rapid growth of a new phenomenon called the “Nones,” those who describe themselves by the popular aphorism “I am spiritual, but not religious.”[ref] [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/american-religion-trends\\_us\\_570c21cee4b0836057a235ad](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/american-religion-trends_us_570c21cee4b0836057a235ad) , accessed on January 28, 2017[/ref] Unlike the Catholic tradition, they are not generally interested in God-talk per se, but they do believe in a benign, nebulous “spiritual” reality outside the scope of material reality that is important to hook up with for the sake of self-fulfillment. It is caught up intensely in the individualism of our age and tends to be monastic in outlook, identifying human nature with spiritual nature, dissolving the classical distinction between the human creature and the Creator.
6. As different as these two spiritualities are in terms of theological substance and spiritual practice, they nevertheless have a common emphasis in the idea that spirituality is about improving, fulfilling, or realizing our true selves through a deeper connection with the boundless realm of the Spirit or God. This is attained through a methodical practice of spiritual exercise. (Its affinity, I think, to the more secularized remedies offered by the self-help industry is striking.) Two separate images or analogies come to mind for explaining its overall point of view. The first is the physical fitness image. Gaining spiritual fitness is analogous to

gaining physical fitness. You get out of it what you put into it, following certain principles that underlie the process. The second is the ladder image. Spiritual methods are like ladders that we use to climb out of this material realm to get closer to the spiritual realm or God. Your spiritual progress is depended not only on your persistent climbing but also on the length of the ladder, the quality of the methods.

7. These are very different images of spirituality from the ones generally held by Reformation Protestants, which I think turns it on its head. Indeed, they are what I would call spiritualities of the law, focused on what we do to get closer to God, and not spiritualities of the gospel, focused on what God does in Christ to get closer (not in terms of physical distance but endearment) to us. First, in these modern spiritualities there is no sense of a relational problem between God and us that needs reconciliation through a crucified and risen messiah. Second, in the act of reconciliation, God is always the active agent who strengthens us (encourages us in faith) and comes closer to us (through the means of grace). Third, whatever we do is always a generative response to or result of God's reconciling work for us. In general, this is the anti-Pelagian or pro-Augustinian emphasis in Reformation Protestant spirituality. Anyway, I hope what I say below will clarify what I have said summarily here.

### **Protestant Spirituality and Luther's Aha!**

8. Based on what I said above, a Protestant understanding of spirituality will always seem strange compared to the popular understanding of spirituality that permeates our culture. But truth be told, it was also strange for Luther when he was first "struck" by the Spirit and "given" his great insight (a genuine "aha!") that people are made

“right” with God not by their doings, but by God’s doing in Christ; not by human merit, but by Christ’s merits. That insight is really the beginning of Protestant Spirituality because it clarified for Luther, the first Protestant (though he would have never thought of himself as anything but a catholic), the ways in which God works in the world. In Luther’s version of Protestant Spirituality it is important to see that God has two distinct – indeed, two contrary – ways of dealing with the world: the way of law and the way of gospel. Through the law, God kills; through the gospel, God makes alive (cf. 2 Cor. 3:6). Through the law, God accuses us of sin, through the gospel God forgives sin. Just as with Augustine, for Luther, this distinction between law and gospel became *the* theological and spiritual interpretive key for understanding the often confusing and offensive works of God as recorded in Scripture, as practiced in pastoral care, and as experienced in daily life. Since spirituality is not simply about Christian doctrine, but the lived experience of life in the Spirit, it is worthwhile to see how Luther’s law/gospel spirituality exhibited itself in his life.

9. If I might be granted a little historical license here, I think it is fair to say that Luther had at least two major experiential “aha’s” in his life! The first experience illustrates a spirituality of the law, the second illustrates a spirituality of the gospel, but with this caveat: the first spirituality will be seen for what it is – a killjoy – only in light of the surpassing joy brought by the second.

### **The Spirituality of the Law and Luther’s Thunderstorm Experience**

10. The first “aha” moment is Luther’s so-called thunderstorm experience, which happened in 1505 when Luther was a young

man of 21. Always obedient to his father's wishes, Luther set out from his home in Eisleben to begin his studies in law at the University of Erfurt. On the way he was caught up in a severe thunderstorm. When a bolt of lightning nearly hit him, Luther was overwhelmed with terror. Being a devout Catholic he did as he was taught. He turned to the patron saint of his family's business and bartered with her as his mediator with God. "St. Anne, save me, and I will become a monk." Since Luther survived the experience, he naturally assumed that she had saved him on the terms he set. Therefore, he followed through on his end of the bargain. Instead of going to law school, he entered the Augustinian friary in Erfurt, much to his father's displeasure.

11. In the monastery, young Martin not only strived to be the perfect monk, he also knew he *had* to be the perfect monk. That was the terms of the deal he made with God through his mediator St. Anne. If God was to give him perfect salvation, he would have to give God the perfect monk. After all, the standard is clear: "Be ye perfect as your Father in heaven is perfect" (Mt 5:48). That standard was emblazoned not only in the most corrupt practices of the church (the vulgar sale of indulgences) but also in its most well-intentioned teachings and practices: alms giving, penances, pilgrimages, the sponsoring of masses, Marian devotions and the veneration of relics. That was the "taken for granted" spirituality of the day.
12. To all outward appearances most of Martin's superiors and companions thought of him as the perfect monk. Martin even had to confess that when compared to other monks, he was the best. But they did not set the bar – God did. And his scruples told him he did not measure up. To be sure, Luther tried to remedy this by going to confession over and over again and doing all the prescribed penances that

were due. But who was he trying to fool? To him all this seemed nothing more than a charade. One day, while in a state of deep angst, Luther's confessor, Johann von Staupitz, said to him. "Martin, you are making things too hard for yourself. All you need to do is love God." "Love God!" he said, "I hate God." For who can love that which you can never satisfy? In spite of all outward appearance, and much to his chagrin, Luther was quite aware that in his heart he was breaking even the number one commandment. And he couldn't help it.

13. Luther had now come to the breaking point—called *Anfechtung*, or his inner turmoil with God. The spirituality of the law that was set into motion so desperately in his thunderstorm vow was now showing its true colors. It was not a means of salvation after all. On the contrary, it only confirmed the opposite: that one cannot please God by striving to be pleasing in oneself. God will not let that falsehood stand. Assuming that he could gain God's pleasure and salvation through "monkery," as Luther later called it, was the great error in his thunderstorm experience. The dynamic that was set in motion in that experience was the same dynamic set into motion between God and Israel when God gave them the law through Moses amidst lightning and thunder. The law is not the word of God that comes to us to save us from our sinful selves; it is the word of God that horrifyingly shows us the depth of our imperfection before God.
14. The spirituality of the law comes in many forms. But this much is certain: when taken seriously, as Luther did, it will always lead to despair; and when taken casually, as most often is the case, it will lead to pride. In both cases, God is not pleased. As Paul says, this does not mean that God's word and work of the law is not "holy, just and good" (Rom. 7:12). It's just that it is not "good

news" (gospel), not a good word, for sinners. Luther was now experiencing personally what the Bible calls the "wrath of God" and there was nothing he could do about it. This is the spirituality of the law.

*—to be continued.*

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## The Pastor's Job

Colleagues,

I've been away for seven days. Some months ago my wife and I observed our 40<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary, an event to which over-generous children responded by underwriting a mid-winter break in a place where palm trees grow. My wife has drilled many useful things into me over the years, among them the ironclad rule that work gets left at home when you go on vacation. We both obeyed the rule this time, chiefly by sinking into novels we wouldn't find the hours for otherwise. One of mine, Khaled Hosseini's [\*A Thousand Splendid Suns\*](#), was good enough to merit a Thursday Theology report one of these days. If I should never get to that, you'll want to read it anyway, with an ear tuned for themes of Mary's "Magnificat." They're weaved through it—from the author's perspective, unintentionally, I should think—from beginning to end. This calls for much musing.

Such musing is not for me today, of course. Day One of post-vocation calls for other things, like returning to the heap of work you left behind, and refocusing both mind and heart on the tasks that loom tomorrow. As it happens, I was graced a few weeks ago with the perfect gift for any pastor who needs, for

whatever reason, to get wits reassembled in speedy order. It reached me indirectly. I wrote to the author, Dick Hoyer, a retired ELCA pastor with deep LCMS roots, and got his permission to pass it along for your refreshment too. That includes those of you whose lay vocation might include the occasional and gentle prodding of a pastor on the topic of what he or she is finally there to do. There's not a stole-wearer in the land who doesn't need to keep rethinking that—or, come to think of it, who couldn't learn a thing or two from the humble example of Hosseini's Mullah Faizullah; but now I'm musing again...

Thank you, Dick, for today's gift. As for your 60+ years of faithful attention to your calling, thanks be to God!

Peace and Joy,

Jerry Burce

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### **"Keep the Sabbath!"**

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Richard O. Hoyer  
on the 60th Anniversary of his Ordination

August 21, 2016

Texts: Isaiah 58:9b-14, Hebrews 12:18-29, Luke 13:10-17

([Revised Common Lectionary, Year C, Proper 16](#))

+ Veni Creator Spiritus +

People of God, sisters and brothers,

Sixty years ago, last Friday, a few score Lutherans gathered in a 90 year-old farmhouse in a suburb of Chicago called Franklin

Park to ordain and install their first full-time pastor. Me.

Jeanne and I with our two-month-old baby had just moved in upstairs. Downstairs was the church. They had taken down the wall between the living room and dining room, and stuffed in as many wooden folding chairs as they could. At the far end they jammed in an old, second-hand, wooden altar, but unfortunately it didn't quite fit. So they had cut six inches off the top of the altar's back, making it look like it pierced the ceiling, and six inches off the bottom so that I had to stoop to reach it.

Sixty years ago. The Ordination Service was very simple. The District's Director of Missions presided, my brother George preached, my father and mother were there and I think one other neighboring pastor. They laid hands on me, prayed for the Spirit's inspiration, and I became a pastor.

The next morning I sat down in my tiny office upstairs, a former walk-in closet, and said to myself, "Now what am I supposed to do?"

Oh, I knew, of course. I was well trained. And I did it, as best I could. But it brings up a very good question: what are pastors supposed to do?

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Well, we ask pastors to do lots of things. For one thing, we expect them to be skilled *administrators* who can run an institution smoothly. We want them to be "*pillars of society*," examples of morality and uprightness, nannies who shake a stick at us, giving the word "sermon" a bad reputation. We want them to be "*change agents*" who will sew up the rips in the social fabric. We want them to be "*enablers*," helping us do good things. And, of course, confirmations, weddings, funerals, all

that stuff. And that's fine.

We Lutherans, however, recognize that all that stuff is peripheral, on the edges of their work. It's like the work in an apple orchard. Picking and marketing apples is the peripheral work. The real, fundamental work is the planting and taking care of the apple trees! Without a tree, there is no fruit. So in the church, the first and fundamental job of the pastor is to plant and nourish the tree.

That job, for Lutherans, is spelled out in our founding document, the Augsburg Confession of 1530 which says, in Article Five, *"To obtain such faith—that is the faith that is defined in the previous article, the faith that trusts that God forgives our sin through the cross of Christ alone—to obtain such faith, God instituted the office of the ministry, that is, provided the Gospel and the sacraments..."*

And there you have it: that's the job of pastors. They are to proclaim the Gospel and administer the sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion so that the Holy Spirit can create faith in us, faith that God forgives our sin through Christ's sacrifice on that cross. When we have that faith we can produce the good fruit the world so badly needs.

Which brings us to today's Bible readings. Today, through these readings, the Holy Spirit is in our face, telling us to **"Keep the Sabbath!"**

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The Sabbath. That word, at its root, means simply, Stop! Stop and rest! So keeping the Sabbath means stop doing all this stuff we're so busy with all week long and rest on the Sabbath Day. But that rest isn't merely physical, like taking a nap, but a rest with God. The Sabbath is a day to stop what we're doing and

listen to our God! The Third Commandment doesn't say, "Remember the Sabbath Day and keep it restful." No, it says, "Remember the Sabbath Day and keep it holy!" If we're supposed to keep it "holy," then it has something to do with God, not our physical well-being. Luther, in his Small Catechism, taught us this: *"We should fear and love God that we may not despise God's word or the preaching of it, but gladly hear it and learn it."* Keeping the Sabbath is not about physical resting, but about having a quiet conversation with God at the kitchen table—or at this table, the one we sometimes call an altar.

But we don't do that very well, do we. We do sit down at this table most Sundays, but do we really listen to our God? It's so hard! I'm afraid, speaking from my own experience, we mostly just sit here and ignore God as though he were a stranger sitting next to us on a bus. Think how that must hurt him! He loves us! He paid the price of that cross to get us to listen to him, to talk with him, live with him, but we don't. We ignore him!

Keeping the Sabbath is not easy. Our spiritual forbears, in Old Testament days, distorted the Sabbath to make it easier. Instead of stopping to listen to God, they turned keeping the Sabbath into a set of rules about resting. Don't do any work! Don't build a fire to warm your house or cook your food! Don't travel beyond a certain distance, and so on. Oh, the intent of all that was good. After all, you can't sit at the kitchen table and talk with God if you're working, or cooking, or travelling or whatever. But the result was the distortion of the Sabbath: the means became the point. Instead of not working so that you can listen to God it became a matter of not working so that your body can get some rest and God won't be mad. You know?

Well, Jesus wouldn't let them get away with that! He kept breaking those Sabbath rules to show them what keeping the

Sabbath really means. That's why he got such a bad reputation among the religious folk of his day, especially the professionally religious. In today's Gospel reading we hear about Jesus leading a Bible study in the local synagogue on the Sabbath day when he notices a crippled woman, all bent over and twisted so that she could hardly walk, couldn't see the sky, the clouds and the stars, couldn't see the faces of the people who loved her. His heart broke for her, so he stood up and called to her, way in the back with the women, to come forward. And there he healed her, right then and there, **on the Sabbath!** Well, you know, that's work! Jesus was working on the Sabbath! Shame on you, Jesus! And he did that sort of thing over and over again. He did it deliberately, shoved his disobedience in the faces of all those pious scribes and Pharisees and priests!

Why? What's he telling us? He's telling us that the point of the Sabbath is not merely to keep the rule of not working, but to stop and listen to God so we can live with him! Not ignore him, but live with him! The prophet Isaiah said that very thing in today's First Lesson: *"If you refrain from trampling the Sabbath,"* that is, if you keep the Sabbath rightly, *"then you shall take delight in the LORD."* You will live with him and find your joy with him!

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Let me summarize: First, the Office of the Holy Ministry is the job of proclaiming the good news that Jesus' death on that cross and his triumphant resurrection has brought us the forgiveness of sin, and with that gives us God as our Father, enables us to live with God, and inspires us to work for God. Second, we are to keep the Sabbath, that is, hear that proclamation of the Gospel from those in the Office of the Holy Ministry, hear the promise it contains, and to trust that promise with our life.

So let's keep the Sabbath now: Hear the Word of God in today's Second Lesson:

*"...you have come to Jesus, to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel."*

You know what he's talking about, don't you? Cain and Abel, in the Bible's story, are sons of Adam and Eve. Cain, filled with murderous jealousy, beats his little brother to death. God, in his holy wrath, confronts Cain, *"What have you done? Your brother's blood is crying out to me from the ground."* Crying out for vengeance.

Shouldn't it? What kind of God would he be if he winked at what Cain did, muttering something about boys will be boys? And what kind of God is he if he shrugs at the violence and evil that we do or would like to do, the ugliness that is in our very hearts, while muttering something about our being merely human?

But the blood of Abel crying out for vengeance is not the blood God listens to. Our Lesson says, You have come to *"the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word."* That blood is the blood of Jesus, shed for us on that cross. That blood does not cry out for God to take vengeance on sinners, to give us the punishment we deserve, but the blood that speaks the *"better word"*, the word of forgiveness.

*"Sprinkled blood,"* the text says. "Sprinkled" is a word the Old Testament priests used, talking about the blood of the sacrifice that the high priest takes into the temple and sprinkles on the Ark of the Covenant for the forgiveness of the sin of God's people.

How can the blood of an animal forgive sin? It can't. Except that, like a sacrament, it points to the one sacrifice that *does* atone. In the same way our pastor, in the Office of

the Holy Ministry, sprinkles that blood each Sunday, so to speak, standing before this altar, proclaiming the Gospel Jesus spoke: *"This is my blood shed for you for the forgiveness of sin."*

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Are you hearing that? Then I'm doing my job in the Office of the Holy Ministry. Are you believing it? Are you trusting the promise God is giving you here? Then you are doing yours. You are keeping the Sabbath.

Do it! Observe the Sabbath rest by resting in the arms of Jesus! When you are *ashamed of yourself*, filled with guilt and self-contempt for what you are and for what you do, then keep the Sabbath: rest in the arms of Jesus who forgives your sins.

When you are *afraid* that you aren't worth a thing because you're not rich, not successful, not pretty or handsome, unwanted, unloved, alone, then keep the Sabbath: rest in the arms of Jesus who forgives your sins.

When your *heart is broken*, when violence bloodies your world, when your soul is empty and the world seems cursed, when you feel that it would be better to end it all, then keep the Sabbath: rest in the arms of Jesus who forgives your sins.

When you *get old* and hear the knock on the door and know that on the other side is "death's bright angel," and you are afraid that you are about to get what you deserve from a holy God, or, worse, that you are about to become nothing, then keep the Sabbath: rest in the arms of Jesus who forgives your sins.

How good it is to call you to this Sabbath rest! How good to have done this job in the Office of the Holy Ministry for 60 years. How better still it is when you do your job, when you

believe the Gospel proclaimed in this place, and, in believing it, you live with God.

Keep the Sabbath, people. Then the work of the Office of the Ministry will get done, and you will find rest for your souls.

+ In Nomine Domine +