

A Baptism Serendipity

Colleagues,

You have been getting ancient Schroederiana in the last five Thursday Theologies, #214-218. Today a return to postings “live.” Marie and I have been home in St. Louis, for not yet quite 24 hours, after our four-week’s worth of travel and work in Europe. We thought the primary purpose was to attend two conferences—The Tenth Int’l Luther Reaearch Congress in Copenhagen, Denmark (August 4-9) and the 50th Anniversary Mission Congress in Willingen, Germany (Aug. 18-21). I presented a paper at the former and was a discussion partner at the latter. Subsequent ThTh postings, d.v., will tell you about those two events. But other happenings, serendipitous ones, may have been the “real” reason we were brought to Europe. One example is recorded below. Alexei is a friend of ours in Klaipeda, Lithuania. Five years ago Marie and I were ELCA mission volunteers in Klaipeda. I taught for a semester at the seminary there. Before this summer’s Copenhagen conference we went there to visit friends from those days. One was Alexei, a Russian, at that time 27, brought to Lithuania with his family during the days of the Soviet occupation. Like many Russians, he stayed after Lithuania regained its independence. Alexei was our Mac-expert for computer help when we needed it. We became more than just commercial acquaintances. In the friendship that grew we learned of his burned-out Marxism, his vague belief in God (though not much of a Christ-component to it), his divorce, his joint-custody of his 5-yr old son. On occasion we talked about faith. He was a searcher. In the intervening 5 years we’ve stayed connected via e-mail.

Writing him is the first thing I’ve done after getting home. Sending that letter on to you as a ThTh posting is now the second.

Peace and Joy!
Ed Schroeder

Dear Alexei, We arrived back home yesterday (Wednesday) afternoon. We didn't record your mailing address when we were with you in Klaipeda, so we couldn't even send you and Sasha post cards from the places we went to after Lithuania. I did send postcards to two of my friends in the USA, Richard Jungkuntz and Martin Marty, asking them to do something for you on our behalf. I haven't yet checked with them to see if they did what I asked them to do.

This was the background of my requests to them: Each of them—years ago—wrote a small book on Baptism. I often used both of these books in the past with my students at the university. So I asked Richard and Martin to send you a copy of the books they wrote—if they were still in print. We think they will be useful for you in your on-going life as a baptized Christian. Since we didn't have your mailing address, I gave them your e-address and asked them to find out from you directly what the proper mailing address would be for sending the books. As I said, I have not yet contacted them to learn what they did—or even if they received my post-card requests.

The main purpose of this message, however, is to reconnect with you now three weeks after your baptism. Marie and I continue to talk about that strange and wonderful event in the apartment just a couple hours before we were to leave Lithuania. We keep using the word serendipity when you asked to be baptized. Our dictionary's definition for that word is: "The phenomenon of finding valuable or agreeable things not sought for." In simpler English: "a happening that is very joyful that you

weren't even looking for, a happy surprise."

So now Marie and I discuss what we might do by "long-distance" now that we have this new connection with each other—not just good friends, but fellow members of the body of Christ.

First I want to tell you how we remember the event. Since there was no video-camera recording it, all we have is our memory to go on. And your memory may give a different report. Yours and ours together may get close to what "really" happened. Saturday afternoon (July 27) the three of us went to the Baltic Sea shore, then to your apartment to enjoy the view, then to pick up Sasha, and then to the sculpture park and evening meal at the restaurant. I had great fun in talking with Sasha, and Marie took photos of him enjoying his gift. I mentioned that I was preaching the next day (afternoon service at the Lutheran church in Kretinga) and you said you'd like to attend. So we parted intending to see each other the next day. On Sunday you and Sasha were there for the service and the sermon, which Pastor Darius Petkunas (my seminary professor colleague from 1997) translated into Lithuanian as I spoke.

After the service we tried to arrange something on Monday, which we did. The five of us—now including Maria—spent some hours on Neringa and on the way back to our apartment we stopped at an internet shop to check our e-mail. Since we were leaving the next day shortly after midday, we said farewell at our apartment, although you did ask for one more get-together the next day (Tuesday) if we had some free time before departing for the airport. There was about an hour free the next morning after we got packed before Donatas and Lineta Romanas were to pick us up, so I called you to tell you that, and in a few minutes you were at our place.

I asked you what your agenda was for this last hour together.

You replied that there was one thing missing in your life, namely, that you weren't baptized. And then you said: "I want to be baptized. And I want you, Ed, to do it." Neither Marie nor I expected anything like that. We were stunned by the serendipity. I didn't know what to respond at first. Then I remembered the Biblical precedent for just such a request in the early days of the life of the church, and consciously thought to take my clues from that text as our conversation continued. The story is in the book of the Acts of the Apostles—the fifth book in the New Testament—chapter 8, verses 26 to 40. I found a Bible in the apartment and read the text out loud. It's a story as serendipitous – and as incredible – as the one we were engaged in. A "chance" meeting between people very different from each other in their personal histories. The "outsider" (an African Jew!) has a question about the Hebrew scripture text he's been reading. The Christian partner Philip (not even a pastor, just a deacon) talks with him about the scripture text, "proclaiming to him the good news about Jesus." And "bang!" he asks to be baptized. Water's nearby. It happens. And once more "bang!" Philip is whisked away, and the outsider, now a Christ-connected insider, goes "on his way rejoicing." We never learn what happened thereafter.

The 3 of us then talked for some time listening to you tell us how you understood what you had just asked for, how you understood the Christian faith. And now I wish we had had a tape-recorder for jogging my memory. You mentioned that Christ's resurrection had been a stumbling block for you, a miracle that was just too miraculous to say yes too. You then described your new perspective on Christ's resurrection—how it fits into the whole picture for you. That's really where I wish I could remember your exact words. But we can probably learn that again as you fill in the blanks for us.

We agreed to have the baptism there in the living room, and I would baptize you as you requested. When Donatas and Lineta came to fetch us, we would tell them that they were to be the official witnesses at your baptism. Marie found a clean sheet of paper and created a baptism certificate. We had no books at hand for the baptism liturgy, so we discussed the basics and put them together as our format. Marie brought a big bowl from the kitchen, put it on the living room table near your chair. Donatas and Lineta came. After a prayer of invocation, Lineta read the Biblical text about the African and Philip, you made your own confession of faith in the triune God, I poured handfuls of water over your bowed head reciting the Triune baptismal formula, Donatas repeated the formula piece by piece in Lithuanian, and Marie gave a concluding prayer. There was rejoicing.

We then put our luggage into D&L's car, agreed to stop for two things on our way to the airport. #1 a short visit to the Lithuanian Christian College campus where both Donatas and Lineta are profs; #2 a quick lunch at the Biscuitas restaurant near the college. You came along for the college tour and then went to bring Maria to the restaurant. Our lunch was both a celebration of your baptism and a farewell for the six of us. We remember that Maria raised questions from her own Russian Orthodox heritage if this was a genuine baptism. I asked Donatas to respond in Lithuanian to bridge the language gaps I would have had in doing so. From what I understood, Donatas explained at length how baptism is universal throughout the various confessional traditions; both immersion and washing have NT precedents and image two different aspects of baptism—dying and rising with Christ on the one hand and on the other hand, washing and cleansing for a new life. Maria's next problem was that she wasn't present for the baptism. You admitted, Alexei, that that was a mistake. Still we had a grand

celebratory last meal.

In our own thinking, Alexei, we know that new Christians (yes, even old ones too like us) need nourishment and the support of other baptized believers. We asked Donatas and Lineta to be conscious of their calling in this matter for you—just by virtue of the “accidental” connection they had with your baptism. We hope that they can do that in face-to-face ways. And we urge you to look around for people and places to become your support community. We’ll continue, of course, to do the same through cyberspace. But that does not have the possibilities that we had with our own face-to-face time together at the end of July.

Two items I will offer for future e-mail exchange: One is to share with you some of the clues in the New Testament for linking your own baptism with Christ’s resurrection, that “sticky” point in your previous thinking about the Christian faith. The second is to pass on to you a few paragraphs in Martin Luther’s Small Catechism about Baptism. If you wish, you could contact Darius Petkunas to get the Lithuanian text for Luther’s small catechism. It could even be that he has a Russian text for it as well. I know from friends in St Petersburg that there is a Russian edition of that catechism.

I’ll close now. There is lot of catch-up work for us to do in these first days after being away from home for 4 weeks. Writing to you was at the top of the list.

Give our greetings to Sasha and Maria.

Peace & Joy in Christ!

Ed and Marie