

A Book Review of FAITH ALOUD: DOING THEOLOGY FROM THE HYMNS IN PAPUA NEW GUINEA. by Marcus Felde, Goroka, Papua New Guinea: Melanesian Institute, 1999

Law-Gospel theology (aka Lutheran) was hard to find at the Tenth Conference of the Int'l Association for Mission Research [IAMS] in Pretoria, South Africa Jan. 21-28, 2000. Seminex alum Richard Bliese, missiologist at the Lutheran Seminary in Chicago, said it was even worse than that: "Lutheran theology is not just a minority voice in missiology today, Ed. It's no voice at all." Would that Marcus Felde had been there and that his FAITH ALOUD had been one of the major presentations! If so, IAMS Ten would have been different.

This volume, basically Felde's Ph.D. project at the U. of Chicago, does just that – missiology with Augsburg Confession theology as the yardstick for what makes something Christian. Now the fact that Marcus is a Seminex grad, and that he quotes me with approval in his work, has nothing to do with my own joy and gladness about FAITH ALOUD. It's the project he undertakes here plus the skill and theological savvy with which he carries it out – that's the grounds for my good cheer.

Marcus's project was to examine the soteriology, the understanding of salvation, in the texts of favorite hymns sung by the Lutherans in PNG – and they are a singing church – and then compare it with the classic paradigm(s) for salvation

central to the Lutheran Reformation. He does this by listening to “three voices.” First is “the voice of the church, how it proclaims its faith in its hymns.” Next comes the “voice of culture [accessed] through anthropological analysis.” Finally “the voice of the gospel” through what he calls “the theology of the Lutheran strand of Christian tradition.”

The first chapter demonstrates why you must “take songs seriously” if you want to get to the center of the project. “Not only as Melanesians but also as Lutherans, the people of this church come from traditions in which singing plays a commanding role.” The next chapter digs into the Lotu Buk [Worship Book], one of the “centers of identity” of these Lutherans. Within the Lotu Buk, “there is a core of hymns so well known as to constitute their confession of faith.” Chapter three unpacks the theology of salvation present in those hymns. “The dominant metaphor turns out to be closeness. We want God to be with us and we want to be with God.”

In chapter 4 Marcus compares this picture of salvation in the hymns with that present in local culture and contrasts the expectation embedded in local culture with the answer provided in the hymns. The two pictures do not coincide. Not that they necessarily ought to, for the salvation people long for may well not be the one they genuinely need. Thus Jesus often finessed his questioners away from their initial requests to a more fundamental need of which they were seemingly unaware – and even more important, a need for which he had Good News to offer.

That’s what we get in chapter 5, even though it is too brief and compact. But it is a start, and it’s what Marcus should spell out in extenso in his next book. Simplest is to use his own words to describe it:

“In the final chapter, we bring to bear insights from the

Lutheran Christian theological tradition. Just as the starting point of our theological task was a concern for what the church is confessing, so the end of our task is to suggest what the church OUGHT to be 'believing, teaching, and confessing.' We are not concerned with correctness for the sake of correctness, or tradition for the sake of tradition. We are concerned that the Gospel of Jesus Christ be proclaimed in its strength and fullness, for the life of the world. If theology, like a good steward, can bring forth from its storehouse something new or something old that releases the power of the Gospel, that is good.

"We assert that the opposite of the good news (expressed as 'God is with us') is not that God is FAR OFF, but that God is AGAINST us. As we examine this possibility, we find that such a teaching is not only more faithful to biblical evidence but also responds more effectively to the concerns of local culture. A fair reading of the local culture, especially of the role played by the underlying logic of reciprocity, leads us to the conclusion that the experience of the wrath of God is as real, and reflection upon it is as universal, as the experience of God's blessing. If we hope to make meaningful contact with local culture, we will be wise to articulate this not as the threat of hell but as the experience of God's implacable, unremitting opposition to evil, and opposition that is a part of universal human experience apart from revelation.

"In sum: We believe that the nearly canonical core of the Lotu Buk is weakened by its inadequate soteriology. To strengthen it, the church should make more use of the metaphor of divine-human reconciliation, the overcoming through Christ of the enmity between God and us."

Marcus offers "a word about the Lutheran bias of our work. We

believe that the calling of denominations is to be REMINDERS, not DEPARTURES. Every denomination or sect has an ecumenical responsibility to remind the whole church of the truth, not a divine calling to depart from the one church. We believe that especially in the whole area of contextual or local theology the Lutheran theological tradition has important gifts to offer, which are rarely seen." IAMS Ten verified the last four words of that paragraph.

Both Marcus's book and IAMS Ten tease me to devote future issues of ThTh to this topic. Richard Bliese, quoted earlier, was even feistier in wondering out loud: "Maybe you can't even do missiology on the basis of Lutheran theology." I know he doesn't believe that. But if it is "rarely seen," then those of us who think it's there must let folks see it. Felde's book cheers us on. At one point he gets so explicit as to say "Luther's theory of the 'hiddenness of God' holds promise – for connecting the gospel in a meaningful way to the cultures of the world. And a lean Lutheran definition of church – 'the assembly of all believers among whom the Gospel is preached in its purity and the holy sacraments are administered according to the Gospel' – has broad ecumenical possibilities. Even the centrality of the theme of justification by faith may give some light on our common path."

FAITH ALOUD is not just for missiologists. But on second thought, maybe it is, since today all six continents are mission fields. So I commend it to all Sabbatheology subscribers. After many years in Papua New Guinea, Marcus now pastors an ELCA congregation in Indiana. That's his current mission field. Each of us has our own.

Peace and Joy!
Ed