

An (Un)LUTHERAN View of the Kingdom of God

Colleagues,

Those of you affiliated with the ELCA probably now have in hand the June issue of THE LUTHERAN, the monthly magazine of our denomination. Playing on the prose of Luther's drum-beat question in the Small Catechism, the magazine cover hypes the lead article this way: "Kingdom of God: What does this mean?"

But after that pro forma nod to Luther on the cover, you find nary a snippet of Luther's theology of the KoG in the article itself. Author Marcus J. Borg, a once-upon-a-time Lutheran (so I've heard), and now a major guru in the Jesus Seminar movement, shows that he has no clue of Luther's distinctive theology of the KoG—or if he does, he's "agin it," and he's out to replace it. Borg's full text is available at http://www.thelutheran.org/article/article.cfm?article_id=6498 so you can see for yourself.

And that in our magazine billing itself as THE LUTHERAN. Truth-in-advertising? Someone was asleep at the switch. [And the editor is a good guy. Even comes from my PCB—predecessor church body. Even closer to home, my brother was his Lutheran High School teacher.]

So I've composed this letter to the editor—and sent it. If only for reasons of length, it'll never make it into the Letters section of subsequent issues. So you get it here.

Dear Editor, I think you did us a disservice with Marcus Borg's piece "Jesus & the Kingdom of God," June 2007. Worse still, Borg does that KoG a disservice, even though he is speaking the

party line of much of today's scholarly theological crowd. Here's his core assertion: "The KoG is what life would be like on earth if God were king and the rulers of this world were not."

As winsome as that may sound, Borg couldn't be more wrong. At least for THE Lutheran. That mantra was verbatim (though in German) the motto of Thomas Muentzer, a once-upon-a-time student of Luther who apparently skipped the lecture on KoG, and also missed the Wittenberg "Aha!" about the Gospel itself. So in the mid-1520s right under Luther's nose Muentzer set about to remove the rulers of his part of the world and replace them with (his version of) "what life would be like on earth if God were king"—and TM, of course, his viceroy. It didn't work. No surprise, the rulers wouldn't abdicate willingly, and they had more swords than Muentzer did, though he did believe that swords would work to make KoG happen. Borg doesn't call for such militarism, but his mantra is the same. It's not the KoG that the Bible links to the word "Jesus."

You might say that it's a debate about theological geography. What is the venue, the locale, the turf, where KoG happens or doesn't happen? Is it internal in human hearts, where we do our fearing, loving and trusting? Or is it not in those hearts, but out in the public arena, in the world of human societies where "rulers of this world" do their ruling? Luther heard the NT speaking only of the former when it spoke of KoG. Borg and company choose the latter. Right off the top—were they contemporaries—Luther would ask Borg: "What makes you think that the rulers of this world are not God-appointees—for just that task, ruling this world? Where did you get that idea? Surely not in any of my lectures." And he'd likely also ask Borg: "If KoG really is what you say it is, then Jesus was a total failure. For by the time of his departure the rulers of this world were just as much in charge as they were the day he

was born. If there was no change there, then the KoG did NOT happen. Jesus and the kingdom of God were a total flop.”

As always for Lutherans, the issue is: what is the GOSPEL? So here, what is the Good News called Kingdom of God that arrives in Jesus? Borg’s answer is the mantra that is the current shibboleth among theologians and among churches (ELCA often included): “a world of peace and justice.” That pair of terms is NEVER predicated to KoG anywhere in the NT. Borg wants us to believe that the KoG is “about who rules the world and how.” “KoG is God’s dream for the earth.” There is NO NT support for that claim. It’s Borg’s fabrication—and that of dozens (hundreds?) of others. It’s fiction. And zillions believe it, not only in the ELCA.

Two followup article come right after Borg’s in the June issue. The second of the two is a study guide where—of all things—Robert Blezard (and he must know that he’s contradicting Borg big time) takes us to the Book of Concord to quote Melanchthon and Luther on the topic. Hallelujah! They do NOT say what Borg says as they spec out the KoG. Blezard’s full text is at http://www.thelutheran.org/article/study_guide.cfm?sg_id=234

Melanchthon and Luther say perfectly clearly that KoG is what Jesus says and does and goes through so that faith can happen, so that folks may trust God, where previously they didn’t do so. A.k.a., the forgiveness of sins. In contemporary lingo KoG is always an event on the God-human interface, NOT the human-to-human interface. It’s an event in our relationship to God (forgiveness of sins), not our relationship to fellow humans in the world (a society of peace and justice). Jesus is sine qua non for the first, not the second. God operates in the second not “needing” Jesus to get his work done there. Yes, he even uses the “rulers of this world” for just that agenda.

Deep down, despite Borg's claim to the contrary, KoG is NOT a political term betokening a "realm of peace and justice." It's a relational term, God's NEW way of relating to sinners via Jesus, new and different from how God otherwise does so. The focus is on God's new way of operating with sinners, not on what the world would look like if everybody got busy with a peace-and-justice social/political agenda. To wit, a world wherein there were no sinners at all.

It's incredible to me how the NT can be so mis-read on the KoG topic. But this is not the first time. It was so in Jesus' time: "Lord, will you at this time restore the Kingdom (of Davidic peace and justice)?" Nope, he said, not my job. It was so in the 16th century. Thomas Muentzer's agenda was just such a peace-and-justice kingdom. Luther disagreed.

Here's the skinny. Contrary to the KoG view in the 16th century—of both the Holy Roman emperor and Holy Roman papacy, and Muentzer and his allies—that Christ's regime is a social/political entity, a "Platonic republic" as the reformers designate it, the Luth. Confessors insisted on saying that the KoG is God rescuing sinners and making faith happen. That's the meaning of such talk as "in the heart," or in the "spiritual" (not spooky or ethereal) realm, the God-relational turf.

The word "regime, God's own regime-change" would be today's best translation for the KoG term. Especially since the US continues fatefully and fatally to foster "regime-change" throughout the world. Thus, the NT Gospels make perfectly clear that in Jesus God is fulfilling a promise for his own "regime-change" with sinners. In Lutheran Latin lingo it's a "coram deo" (interface with God) agenda, not a "coram hominibus" (interface with fellow humans).

Oh, yes, that "coram hominibus" turf, the human-to-human

interface, does get lots of attention in Luth. Reformation theology, but it's under the rubric of God's Left Hand—where God is deeply involved in peace and justice stuff with his designated southpaws—zillions of them. KoG is the work of God's Right hand and of him now residing at God's right hand. "Rulers of this world" have no "stuff" to make this right-hand KoG happen. Neither do Borgian theologians who are out to replace those rulers.

Bleazard cites ML in the Large Catechism on the "Thy kingdom come petition." It's all about Christ's saving work to bring sinners to faith. For a clean contrast to this discussion of KoG, go to Luther's large catechism on the 4th petition. That is where he does indeed address the left-hand work of God—the *coram hominibus* world of daily life in human society, the peace and justice arena. Plenty of peace and justice stuff there. BUT never once does Jesus even get mentioned. That's not an accident. Jesus's agenda is KoG, God's regime-change with sinners. Keeping the old creation from falling apart is mightily important to God, but it's not what God's doing in the KoG department. "Daily bread"—defined by ML as everything needed for human social/political existence—is NOT KoG. God's got scads of other southpaws assigned to those tasks. That's what the Book of Concord says. Granted, the reformers could be wrong. But Bleazard seems to think they might be on target. He's right, of course. Borg is not. He seems not to have a clue about this Lutheran catechetical heritage.

The closest Borg comes to anything like "*coram deo*" talk is his couple references at the end of the article to "centering in God." If that is what Jesus was up to, then the Pharisees should have been his heroes. KoG = centering in God? Nonsense. Jesus was out to get sinners forgiven (and that was a "life-giving"—ahem!—task for him). He didn't ask these sinners to "center" in God! He invited them to trust his word of

forgiveness, to move from unfaith to faith. "Young man, you'll be glad to hear this: Your sins are forgiven." Also to the Pharisees: "get un-centered from God the legislator, and get offered an alternate center, God's sin-forgiver Jesus." If you want to talk about "centering in God," that's the Reformation rubric for doing so. If Borg does know that, he never divulges it to us.

Deep down, this widespread view of KoG is the triumph of Calvinism "centering" things Christian in the "sovereignty of God." It's taking over again—also among Lutherans who write for THE Lutheran — with a vengeance. For the Lutheran reformers it's not God's sovereignty, but God's mercy that's at the Christian center. Here Calvin surprisingly parallels the classic RC notion of the church as an earthly kingdom, a "Platonic republic" where peace and justice run the show. So Calvin tried to make Geneva just that, a "kingdom of God" city. For a while he succeeded where Muentzer failed. But it didn't last. Reason: it couldn't last. Allegedly "Christian" earthly kingdoms always collapse. They are built on sand. Christ's KoG has other foundations.

For the Lutheran reformers Calvin's social engineering with supposed KoG grounding was not only a frightful misreading of the NT Gospels. It was also a lunge toward the utopianism of the Left-wingers of the Reformation—to create a "perfect" human society—even if in miniature—where somehow (magically?) sin-in-the-citizens wouldn't interfere to mess up the paradise of peace and justice.

Nonsense, said the Luth. reformers. KoG is precisely addressed to the sin agenda, and that means to human hearts, to the false gods they are fearing, loving and trusting, with a goal to get them fearing, loving, trusting God focused on the person and work of Jesus.

Yes, God knows this about the deadly dangers of a sinner-populated planet. So Luther concludes: Because of this given “sin-factor” now messing up creation, God set up his Left-handed regimes—multiples of them in all “secular” societies (aka regimes of God’s “law”)—to moderate the sinful-hearts factor, with carrots and sticks. [Self-centered sinners would respond to rewards for good behavior and (most of the time) avoid the stick for their bad behaviors.]

Left-hand regimes, of course, would never cure the sinful hearts. Rampages, big and little injustices, big and little un-peace, insane wars—even by so-called born-again Christian leaders—would still occur. But until the chaos of the very last days, when even these divine emergency measures would buckle, God’s law-regimed structures in the old creation would restrain sinners from wrecking everything.

Only one thing “heals” sinful hearts, the KoG, God’s regime-change that came to fullness in Jesus. Folks with sinful hearts get a new offer from God called mercy. When they trust that Christ-achieved mercy they do indeed go with new freedom, new courage, back into their old left-handed assignments, but they don’t try to make the world a “Jesus-world.” Instead they join God-conscious of what they (and God) are doing out there in the old creation—in the law-regime to keep the world from blowing apart. Sure, that is peace and justice stuff—and tender loving care, etc. But they don’t get their signals for p&j from Jesus. He himself never gave any specs for that. “Natural law and human reason” is what the Reformers say over and over again when asked where to get cues for our callings in the world. NEVER do they say “Check out the KoG for your signals.” And never ever do they hype another current p.c. shibboleth about “Gospel values” to be enacted in society.

This is a hot potato in lots of areas of today’s Christian

scene, as you, dear editor, may well know. Most patent it is in missiology circles today, where peace and justice notions are the reigning definition of Christian mission in a pluralist world. Prose coming from our own ELCA mission division is regularly laced with this lingo. But THE Lutheran, your journal (OUR journal) ought not to be on the wrong page on this one. It's at the core of what the Reformation was all about. Borg missed it. THE LUTHERAN needs to publish an op ed, a second opinion, on this one.

Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder

Yes, gentle ThTh reader, herewith another installment of "Crossings melody for a one-string banjo." But if it is indeed the song that makes the NEW Testament new, what's to do? Especially when so many looney tunes are being sung everywhere. Yes—sob!—worst of all, within the churches. Hope you too can "stay on message."

Cheers!

EHS