

For a Nation to Repent (Continued) #4

Colleagues,

I've been out of town for most of the week since the last posting. Four of the past 7 days were spent in Minnesota with 250 church-workers (most of them pastors) at the Fall Theological Conference of the Southwest Minnesota Synod of the ELCA. The topic was "Thinking Theologically about Sexuality." You know what the actual topic was. There were two presentors, each of us giving two 50-minute presentations and then each responding to the other's essay. The other speaker was a Lutheran seminary prof, good friend, presenting the "traditional" view, which he affirms. Because of past ThTh postings on this topic I was invited to be the dissenter. We were both mandated to ground our positions in the theology of Reformation Lutheranism. We both sought to do so, but it came out different. I hope to tell you about it in more detail soon in these postings. Returning home yesterday evening I met the mini-deluge of responses from you readers about the notion of God calling the USA to repentance. Including this one: "Ed, I simply note that in your most recent posting of points of view received [ThTh #171], you left my comments out and I never heard from you. Peace! [Name] "

To that colleague I regret to say (what I say to all): There are too many responses coming these days for me to fulfill either of these two requests. Therefore more than one of you will be able to say the same thing: "you left my comments out and I never heard from you." I regret that, but I see no other option. Today again I select a few—both negative and affirmative—and pass them on to you.

Peace & Joy!
Ed Schroeder

1. Ed, Thought you might enjoy this – fits in with what ThTh 172 was about, I think! [Luth pastor]These words were issued by the President, in an official proclamation responding to cataclysmic events affecting the nation. “We Americans,” the President said, “have been preserved, these many years, in peace and prosperity. We have grown in numbers, wealth and power, as no other nation has ever grown. But we have forgotten God. We have forgotten the gracious hand which preserved us in peace, and multiplied and enriched and strengthened us; and we have vainly imagined, in the deceitfulness of our hearts, that all these blessings were produced by some superior wisdom and virtue of our own. Intoxicated with unbroken success, we have become too self-sufficient to feel the necessity of redeeming and preserving grace, too proud to pray to the God that made us!”

Was it George W. Bush who issued that proclamation? No. It was Abraham Lincoln, in his “Proclamation Appointing a National Fast Day,” March 30, 1863.

His words are just as timely today.

You can read the full text of Lincoln’s proclamation, which resulted in a “day for National prayer and humiliation,”

at:<http://showcase.netins.net/web/creative/lincoln/speeches/fast.htm>

2. Thanks so much for your repentance messages. Right on target for all of us and the texts for this Sunday just amplify. Difficult for me to preach such truth in a place like [name] where I am serving as interim, but I am trying. Peace and Joy [Luth. pastor]
3. Blessings abound on this courageous, profound message of repentance. I have been inspired by these Scriptural words. Peace and Joy, even now. [Retired Luth. University prof]
4. Well done! If only 'Dubya' would read and take heed to your prophetic words and chosen hymns.. After receiving your scholarly study, one can only exclaim—"That'll preach!" [Luth. pastor]
5. You have now proven to me that you are no longer worth reading – your ego – your theology that ignores the scriptures and your self indulgent pride are more than I can take. [Luth pastor]
6. Would you be writing such a letter to the President if he were a Democrat? Your letter strikes me as nothing but a partisan attack against an official of the "wrong" party. Did you write such a letter to Bill Clinton after the mass murders at the embassies in Tanzania and Sudan? If you recall, Bill Clinton and his administration are the ones who lashed out with poorly thought out vengeance and retaliatory military strikes in the face of terrorist-perpetrated mass murder. I recall that you came to Clinton's defense, even in the face of his adulterous affair. [Ed. As far as I can recall, not true. In private conversation at that time I referred to him as a lecherous (bleep).] (Unlike the prophet John the Baptist who took Herod to task for marrying his brothers wife.) It appears that you select your prophetic statements carefully to be addressed only to those of the "wrong" political party. The Bush administration has been using an enormous amount of

restraint against vengeance and retaliation. The Bush administration has even had the guts to change the name of the operation instead of insisting on the “infinite justice” misnomer. The Bush administration has spoken strongly against people who want to blame the mass murders on all Arabs or all Muslims. The Bush administration’s response, all things considered, has been thoughtful, restrained, well-conceived.

You certainly are correct about Christians’ need to repent in the face of calamity. Our Eucharist services on Sept. 16 were services of repentance. The church’s role is to call people to repent, as you say Luther said it, as well as to support the fight to protect others from being mass-murdered. We ought to expect the church to call us to repentance. The President is not the church.

In order for your argument to be consistent, you must exhort Jewish people to repent in the face of the Holocaust. That has an odd ring to it, doesn’t it? There’s a fine line between calling for repentance and blaming the victim. Will you also write a letter to the leaders of Israel, requesting that they call for their repentance in the face of the Holocaust?

Finally, I see little difference between yours and Jerry Falwell’s position. You both agree that the mass murders were God’s justice being meted out against sinners. The only difference is who you perceive the sinners to be. You say that the sinners are the conservatives, big business, military, etc. Falwell says that the sinners are the liberals, gays, feminists, abortionists, etc. Neither of your politically partisan, non-nuanced approaches convince me. Both positions strike me as avoiding naming the thing for what it is – evil. Mass murder is evil. In the story you quote about the tower of Siloam, the point was not who

the sinners were, the point was to repent, that is, to turn to God instead of turning to the victims and listing their sins, blaming them for being part of the “big business” world or the “military establishment.”

Compassion and aid for the victims’ families. Personal repentance. Prayer for terrorists, that God change their hearts. Support for the prevention of this happening again – even the use of some force as the lesser of two evils. Support for our leaders in the midst of this excruciatingly difficult time. This is and will continue to be my approach. You simply have not convinced me that it is time to attack our President and to blame him for not calling the nation to repent. [Luth. pastor]

7. I find your insistence that the events of 9/11 are God-led to be offensive. You offer the evidence of comparison to past events citing both scripture and history. Yet, you do not substantiate the charge that this is God’s action now. It sounds more like Ed’s left wing political ideas speaking than God to me. I also find your insistence that human repentance is a precondition to the Gospel is terrible theology. How can we by our good works of repentance become worthy of the Gospel? Have we done repentance good enough now. Your response does not sound Gospel centered at all.

On the other hand, to say that other people hate us because of the way we treat them and the implication is therefore, that we earned and deserved this. To say, if only we had been better people then we could have earned our way out of this, is also works righteousness. This too is terrible theology.

I do believe that this is a repentance moment, but it makes a huge difference in the way we repent if God is

against us(your position) or if God is for us (the Gospel position). Your position has no hope because we all sin and fall short of the glory of God. We will never be able to repent good enough. The Gospel precedes repentance on our part and makes repentance possible. We repent not so that the Kingdom of God can come, but rather we repent because the kingdom of God has come in Jesus Christ.

This is such simple theology I don't understand why you can't see the implications of your position. Perhaps this is a reaction of fear, wanting something absolute other than the Gospel. God's peace. [Luth. pastor]

8. Ed, When I received this attached email "Where is God?" [Ed: Theme of which is that God was everywhere in the rescue operations, but not at all in the destruction], I thought of you and our exchange of emails and the flood of responses you have received in the last two weeks re: your theologizing about 9-11. But the email on "Where is God?" (which ironically must be really getting around because in the last two days I have had some of my members refer to it) is a classic example of the kind of "theology of glory" that is around these days. It seems that so many feel they have to "defend God" when these horrors happen. Not only does this stuff have no way to comprehend any notions of the wrath of God, they also don't have use for the cross. They categorically say that God was not involved in the WTC disaster. But what kind of a God is this who seems to let things get out of control or is absent from the falling, deadly debris? Perhaps a better way to answer the question about where is God without scaring them off with the deepest level ... of the deus absconditus [Ed:"hidden god" Luther's label for God the killer, as in Psalm 90] is "cross talk." God was there in the disaster, right there in the midst of the crumbling

rubble, getting crushed and dying “with” those people who lost their lives. Isn’t that what the cross is all about? God joining us in the midst of the worst sort of bloodletting to not only suffer with us but finally also to offer us hope of life beyond . . . precisely because the crucified one lives! I gave this answer to some pious ladies in my Bible class this morning who had also quoted this email (thinking it was the Gospel!) and surprisingly they liked my “rewording” of the 9-11 tragedy with the cross of Christ better!!!! The Gospel does enable us to more honestly deal with the harsh realities of suffering without always having to rationalize them or explain them away. [Luth. pastor]

9. Yes, I’m afraid the fear of the “R” Word, etc. is all around us. I actually heard a neighboring ELCA pastor’s sermon from 9/16 (tape-delayed by a week for the radio) that said he could not believe the the victims on the disasters on 9/11 could possibly be “collateral damage” for God’s judgment on our nation. Actually what he said seemed much closer to “this tragic event is NOT because of God’s judgment upon this people” because “God doesn’t operate that way.” I sort of wanted to agree with him except I thought about Pilate & the Siloam tower too; and Job’s children, and the Pharoah’s armies, and the women and children inside of Jericho, and the “innocent ones” of Jerusalem who didn’t survive to follow Jehoiachin to Babylon or Jeremiah to Egypt.

Keep at it, Ed! We all need to hear it: “unless you repent you will all likewise perish.”

Luther keeps me going in times like this and sets the tone of judgment/grace:

*Even as we live each day,
Death our life embraces.*

*Who is there to bring us help,
Rich forgiving graces?
You only Lord, you only!... (LBW #350)*

Add my Kyrieleis to yours too!! [Luth. pastor]

10. The response [of some of your critics] is typical of those who hear you talk about God using the horrible events of history to work his terror. [Those who] want to be “good” (like God is always “good”) have a terrible time truly appreciating the wrath of God and the deus absconditus. They hear you “talking politics” and being unpatriotic by daring to raise the stakes and propose that God might be using the terrorists of 9-11 to drive us all to our knees. A suggestion: maybe you need to go out of your way to show that the repentance you are calling for and the kind of theological question you are raising involves a whole lot more than just you making political judgments about America’s bad behavior in international and foreign affairs. I think you would say that any experience of “negation” could be God’s wrath and that repenting and clinging to Christ is the only way to be sure that we can face God’s wrath and live through it. I know [some pastors who] do not even have stuff like this on their theological road map. Another interesting spin on all this. Could it be that America is the equivalent of the ancient Cyrus of Persia and that God might be using America to combat terrorism in the same way that he used Cyrus to destroy evil Babylon which enabled Israel to return to Jerusalem??? Cyrus may have been no more “godly” than the super power America, but the prophets still saw Cyrus and the Persians as God’s tool for good. This whole business of making judgments about relative right and wrong, goodness and evil, especially on the

world stage of international affairs is so ambiguous and so multifaceted that maybe some of your (and mine) rather black and white judgments about America bringing this upon herself may not be so black and white. But I am still with you on repentance all the way. Such repentance is required not because it means that you and I and have got the real, only and true understanding as to what God was doing on 9-11 but rather in the face of such massive suffering and death Christ is our only hope. Isn't this all about magnifying Christ and his work? Isn't Christ the only place where God has definitively revealed what he is up to in this world? And isn't repentance our clearing the deck of any blind spots, idolatries or self justifications that prevent us from clinging to him and only him?

Actually I think [some of your critics] are the ones who are substituting their political judgments for the ultimate truth of God . . . Christ crucified and risen. Their peace and certainty come from knowing beyond a doubt that God was NOT using the terrorists and that we are unambiguously a force for good in this world. Talk about dangerously trying to figure out the hidden God!

I hope this doesn't sound too muddled. One thing I do know from almost 25 years in the ministry now. Faithfully proclaiming repentance and faith, faithfully preaching law and Gospel, drives everyone nuts. One minute we sound like a liberal democrat and the next minute like a conservative republican. That makes me feel somewhat vindicated. God's Word must never be co-opted by some political ideology either of the left or right. [Luth. pastor]

11. Finally, a few words from the pastor's reflections in The Olive Leaf, the monthly newsletter of Mount Olive Lutheran Church in Mukwonago, WI: At this time of national strife,

turn to God on behalf of our nation, as part of our nation, and repent. For the boldness of Christ was that he regarded our sins as his. Our boldness is that we regard our nation's sins, as well as the sins of the whole world, as our own, and then, by faith, give them to Christ to bear and to forgive. Who knows? Perhaps God will be merciful, on account of Christ and our humble prayers, and grant us new possibilities. We can certainly hope. God's peace be with you in these troublesome times. Pastor